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).

INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS THE WORLD OF JAPANESE DECORATED TOMBS

SILVA VESCO,[1] MARK HUDSON[2] AND CLAUDIA ZANCAN[3]

The Japanese term *sōshoku kofun* 装飾古墳—literally a *kofun* (ancient mound), bearing *sōshoku*, meaning decorations—was introduced into scholarly discourse in the early twentieth century by the archaeologist Kōsaku Hamada. In English, it is most commonly rendered as 'painted tombs' (Kidder 1964), 'ornated tombs' (Barnes 1992), or 'decorated tombs' (Zancan 2013, 2023), though the editors of this volume have allowed individual contributors to adopt the translation they consider most appropriate to their respective discourse. Readers will therefore encounter a range of equivalent expressions throughout these pages, including decorated tumuli, decorated *kofun*, adorned tombs, and the original Japanese term itself. As Kobayashi (1964: 4) makes clear, the term *sōshoku kofun* refers specifically to the concealed interior of the burial mound and does not encompass the decorative elements erected on the outer surface of the tomb, such as *haniwa* (clay figurines) or *sekijin sekiba* (stone statues of humans and horses). Furthermore, tombs whose walls bear only a plain application of red pigment, without any additional motifs or designs, are likewise not classified as *sōshoku kofun*.

Decorated tombs are distributed across the Japanese archipelago, with the island of Kyushu accounting for the majority of known examples: 448 out of a national total of 849 as of 2025 (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025). Nevertheless, *sōshoku kofun* have been identified in more areas, including Tottori, Ibaraki, and Fukushima Prefectures as well as in the Osaka area, attesting to a phenomenon that, although regionally concentrated, was not confined to a single geographic zone.

In chronological terms, Japanese decorated tombs belong to the Late and Final Kofun periods (late fifth–seventh century), with the earliest examples dating to the late fourth century AD. The tradition persisted throughout the seventh – early eighth centuries in certain areas of Kyushu and the northern regions (Yanagisawa 2022), even as the central Kinai area had already transitioned into the Asuka period (Sasaki 2023), marked by the introduction of Buddhism and, consequently, the adoption of cremation.

This period remains protohistoric in Japan (Barnes 2015: 25), meaning that written language had yet to achieve widespread use; consequently, images in funerary contexts—such as decorated tombs—assumed a crucial communicative role. As Zancan points out (Zancan 2026a, 2026b), the *sōshoku kofun* are far from being mere 'adorned' monuments; rather, their evolving visual programmes served as a primary field for negotiating relationships between the living and the dead, functioning as spaces where social identity, regional politics, and spiritual communication were actively performed.

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Classification of *Sōshoku Kofun*

Sōshoku kofun are conventionally classified into four types, distinguished by the location and technique of their depictions. The classificatory framework adopted here follows the influential typology proposed by Kobayashi (1964: 4-5), though the original order has been modified to reflect the chronological sequence in which each type first appears.

The Sarcophagus Type (Sekkan-kei 石棺系)

The earliest decorated tombs belong to the sarcophagus (*sekkan*) type, in which decoration is applied to the exterior or interior surfaces of the stone coffin, as well as to its lid (Figure 1). Motifs are generally rendered through incision, low-relief carving, or line engraving. The principal iconographic repertoire comprises mirror forms, circular motifs, and the *chokkomon* (a distinctive geometric pattern combining straight lines and curved arcs) (Figure 2). As the period progressed, sarcophagus morphology evolved towards house-shaped forms and stone-lined cists, and the decorative repertoire expanded to incorporate representations of weapons and armour, executed in both relief and incision.



Figure 1: *Sekkan-kei* type: Kamogo tomb stone coffin with lids decorated with circle and *chokkomon* motifs. (Photograph by Zancan of the replica displayed at the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs, Japan).

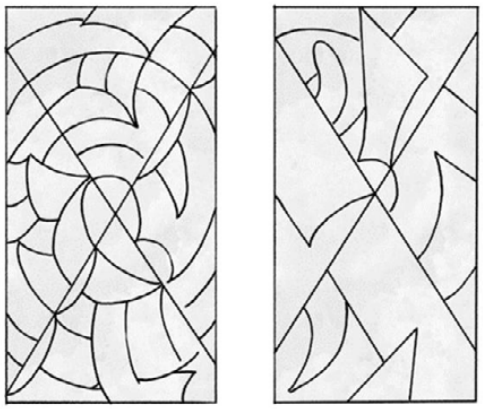

Figure 2: *Chokkomon* (straight lines and curved arcs) motif. (Mariapia Di Lecce).

Stone Slabs Type (Sekishō-kei 石障系*)*



Figure 3: *Sekishō-kei* type: Segonkō Tomb No. 1 with relief and painted motifs of geometric and weaponry patterns. (Photograph by Zancan of the replica displayed at the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs, Japan).

The second category comprises tombs in which flat stone slabs—known as *sekishō* or stone barriers—decorated with relief carvings or incised designs, are arranged along the lower perimeter of the stone chamber walls, functioning as a substitute form of wall decoration (Figure 3). These slabs also served to partition the resting places of individual occupants within the chamber. The iconographic repertoire includes *chokkomon*, concentric circles, diagonal lines, quivers, and shields, rendered in relief or incision. A notable development within this category is the application of polychrome pigments to the carved surfaces. The *sekishō-kei* is generally considered as a transitional form, bridging the earlier sarcophagus-decoration tradition and the fully developed wall-painting practices that followed.

The Mural/Wall Painting Type (Hekiga-kei 壁画系)

In the mural/wall painting type (*hekiga-kei*) category the walls of the stone chamber are directly painted or incised with geometric patterns or pictorial representations (Figure 4). The development of the mural tombs started from the early sixth century and lasted until the end of the phenomenon. The iconographic range of this category is the most extensive, including geometric iconographies such as concentric circles and continuous triangles, abstract motifs like the *sōkyakurinjōmon* (wheel-like pattern with bifurcated legs/protrusions; Figure 5 A), *warabitemon* (leaf-fern frond pattern; Figure 5 B) and, weaponry, and elaborate figurative compositions featuring horses, human figures, boats, birds, and fish. Techniques range from line engraving to the application of pigments, and in certain examples the arrangement of figures begins to suggest narrative sequences.



Figure 4: *Hekiga-kei* type: rear wall of the *ishiyakata* of Daibō tomb. (Photograph by Zancan of the replica displayed at the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs, Japan).

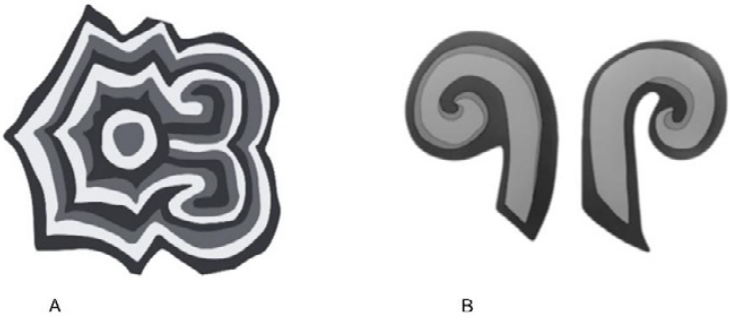

Figure 5: Abstract patterns: (A) *sōkyakurinjōmon* motif; (B) *warabitemon* motif. (Drawing by Zancan).

The Rock-cut/Tunnel Tomb Type (Yokoana-kei　横穴系)

Unlike the mounded tombs, *yokoana*—rock-cut or tunnel tombs—are tombs excavated directly into rock faces or hillsides. The fourth category therefore comprises tombs of this type, in which relief decoration is applied primarily to the exterior façade flanking the entrance (Figure 6), while incised designs also appear on the inner walls. Instances of painted pigment surviving over the relief carving are likewise attested. Like the mural type, rock-cut tombs also appeared from the sixth century and lasted until the late seventh century. The iconographic repertoire includes geometric patterns, human figures, and weapons—widely interpreted as serving an apotropaic function (Kusaka 1967; Fujii and Ishiyama 1979; Saitō 1983; Mori 1985)—as well as boats and animals.



Figure 6: *Yokoana-key* type: depictions in relief around the entrance (left side) of the façade of Nabeta No. 27 Tomb. (Photograph by Zancan).

Table 1: Summary table of characteristics for each tomb typology.

Type	Period	Placement of Iconographies	Main Iconographies	Techniques
Sarcophagus	Late fourth – fifth century	Exterior or interior surfaces of the stone sarcophagus; lid	Mirrors, circle motifs, triangles, *chokkomon*, weaponry (late phase only)	Incision, low-relief carving, line engraving
Stone slabs	Fifth century	On the stone slabs (*sekishō*)	Mirrors, circle motifs, triangles, *chokkomon*, quivers, shields	Relief carving; incised designs; sporadic application of polychrome pigments
Mural/ painting	Sixth – seventh century	Tomb walls	Geometric motifs, abstract motifs (*warabitemon*, *sōkyakurinjōmon*), weaponry, figurative motifs (human figures, boats, animals), narrative scenes	Painting, engraving
Rock-cut/ Tunnel	Sixth – early eighth century	Exterior façade; tomb walls	Geometric motifs, weaponry, figurative motifs (human figures, boats, animals), mini narrative scenes	Relief carving, painting, engraving

Colours and Pigments

The range of colours identified in *sōshoku kofun* is restricted to six: red, black, white, yellow, green, and blue. However, finding all of them together within the same tomb is extremely rare, as decoration is most commonly limited to red alone, followed by green and blue (Nagashima 1993). All pigments derive entirely from natural minerals and clays (Nagashima 1993; Kawano 2021). Red (*bengala*), an iron-rich mineral naturally produced in the soil, is the dominant base colour, applied both to decorative motifs and broadly across the stone chamber walls, whereas white and yellow—similarly clay-based—are attested as ground coats in fewer instances. Black, sourced either from manganese-rich soil or charcoal, was used mainly for depicting figurative motifs such as human figures, animals, and weaponry (Nagashima 1993; Ikeuchi 2015). The distinction between green and blue remains particularly complex: recent analysis reveals that what was previously identified as blue, derived from a variation of the green pigment, may in fact be ash-coloured, and its precise origin requires further investigation (Kuchitsu 2000). Also, a profound technical shift occurred in the relationship between colour and drawing. Early tombs utilised mineral pigments—such as iron-rich red (*bengala*), clay-based whites or yellows, and charcoal-derived blacks—as continuous chromatic fields from which silhouettes organically emerged. Some later tombs moved toward a system organised by preliminary black ink drawings filled with colour.

This fluid transition from raw colour to structural outline directly anticipated the foundational methodology of classical Japanese secular painting schools (Yamato-e) and handscrolls, where flat blocks of colour are bounded by definitive line work.

Furthermore, visibility simulations suggest the paintings were executed in sunlight prior to the installation of the ceiling, as torchlight renders certain hues indistinguishable (Ikeuchi 2015: 46–7; Kawano 2021: 240).

Sōshoku Kofun Layout

A fundamental transformation in burial architecture marks the Late Kofun period and directly conditions the structural form of decorated tombs. The earlier vertical pit chamber (*tateanashiki sekishitsu*), sealed permanently after a single interment, was progressively replaced by the horizontal stone chamber (*yokoanashiki sekishitsu*), which comprised a passage leading into one or more chambers where the deceased were laid. This architectural shift carried significant consequences: the entrance to the passage could be blocked with stone and subsequently reopened, enabling repeated use of the same tomb for successive members of the same family or lineage (Yanagisawa 2005; Mizoguchi 2013; Kawano 2023). This architectural transformation had direct repercussions on the iconographic repertoire of the tombs. This stylistic evolution mirrored a functional shift: iconography transitioned from an intimate, private layout intended purely for the deceased inside closed sarcophagi to an explicit, narrative visual programme directed toward the mourners within open, reusable horizontal stone chambers. As Japan transitioned into the historical era, this early visual language laid the structural and technical foundations for native painting traditions. The late mural tombs demonstrate the earliest attempts at organising figures to suggest narrative sequences.

Regionalisation is also perceptible in mortuary practice at the level of coffin use. Following the distinctions proposed by Wada (1989, 2014), Kinai-region tombs tend to employ closed coffins—emphasising the containment and seclusion of the body—whereas open coffins were more common in Kyushu. A further distinctive development in central Kyushu was the *ishiyakata*, an open, house-shaped stone structure capable of housing one or two bodies.

To help the readers of this volume with the technical terminology of these tombs, the following figures illustrate: (1) Horizontal stone chamber with *ishiyakata* (Figure 7 A); (2) Horizontal stone chamber without *ishiyakata* (Figure 7 B); (3) Rock-cut tomb with *ishiyakata* (Figure 8 A); Rock-cut tomb without *ishiyakata* (Figure 8 B).

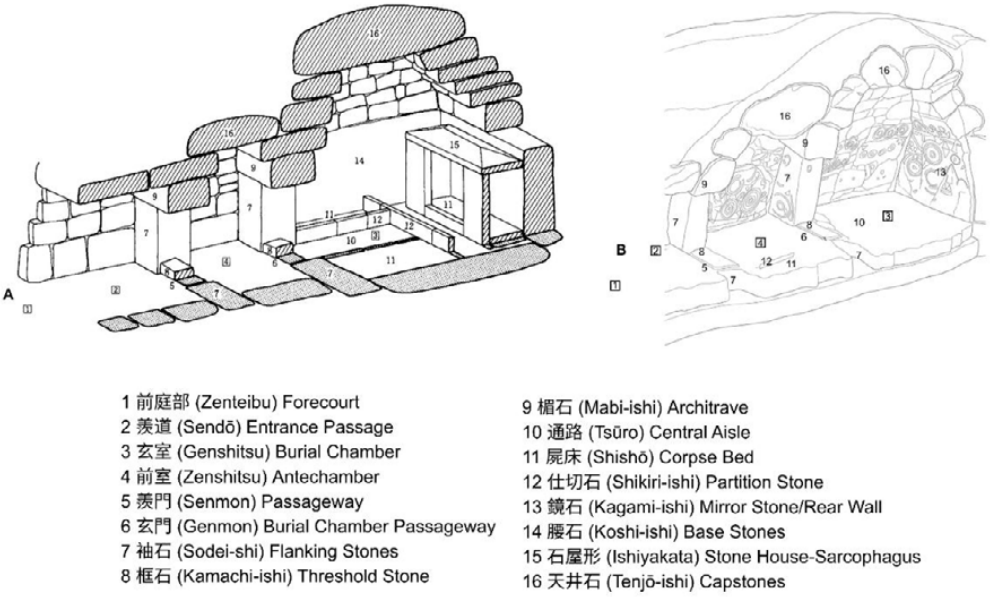

Figure 7: Decorated tombs layout: (A) horizontal stone chamber with *ishiyakata*; (B) horizontal stone chamber without *ishiyakata.* (A after Kumamoto-ken kyōiku iinkai (ed.) 1984: 6; B: drawing by Zancan).

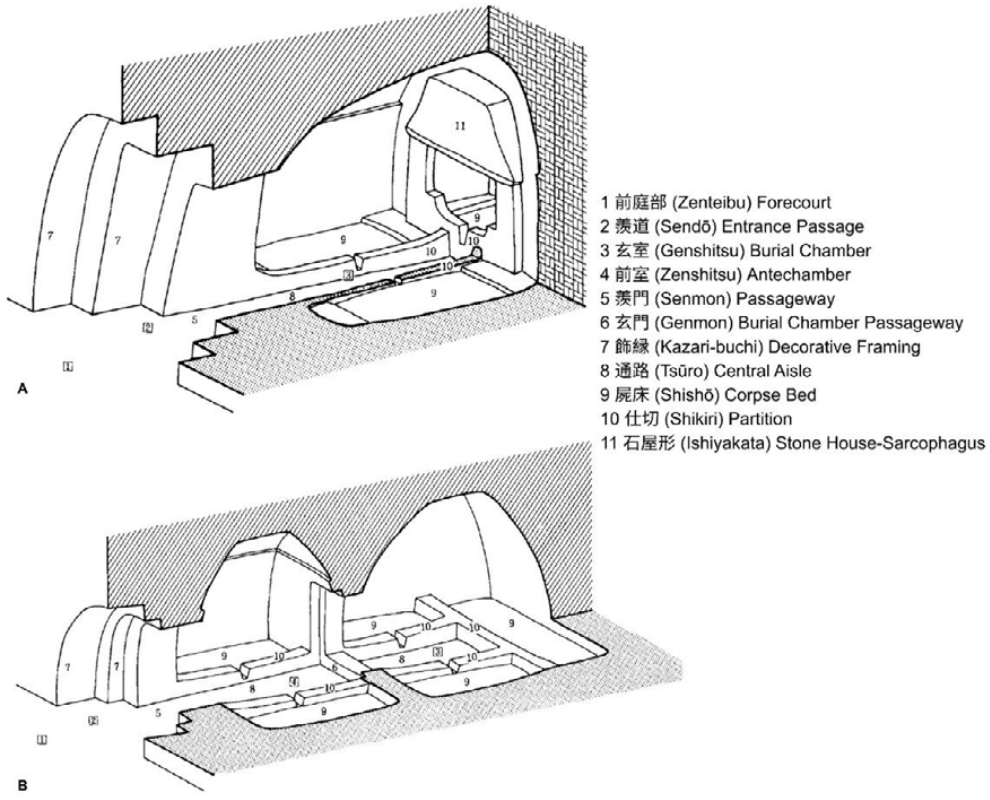

Figure 8: Decorated tombs layout: (A) rock-cut tomb with *ishiyakata*; (B) rock-cut tomb without *ishiyakata.* (After Kumamoto-ken kyōiku iinkai (ed.) 1984: 7).

Decorated Tombs in their Social and Political Context

While many of the chapters in this volume consider decorated tombs from the perspective of style, decoration and technique, the social and political significance of the tombs is also discussed in several contributions. A number of authors emphasise the distinctive local diversity of the decorated tombs, although the role of inter-regional exchange in their development is noted, especially by Yoshida (Chapter 2). The diversity of decorated tombs needs to be understood against the broader background of Kofun period burials. For many archaeologists it is the standardised, widely-shared features of Kofun tombs that have provided a key to the social changes of the time. This is especially true during the Early Kofun phase when standardised keyhole tomb shapes and sets of burials goods—especially bronze mirrors—distributed over large areas of western Japan are correlated by many scholars with the spread of Yamato power (e.g., Kobayashi 2006; Tsude 2006). Decorated tombs, by contrast, are difficult to insert into such narratives.

The decorated tombs of Kyushu are sometimes approached through a framing of opposition or resistance to the Yamato state. We know that certain Kyushu elites opposed the expansion of political centralisation, a resistance that likely culminated in the Iwai 'rebellion' of 527. Many decorated tombs were constructed after Iwai's defeat. Whether or not the Kyushu decorated tombs continued to express resistance to Yamato in their mortuary architecture and decorative motifs is a key question. It can at least be argued that the local tradition of decorated tomb building continued after Iwai, but the depictions found inside the tombs do not present explicit images of opposition. The few human figures that appear are not part of a social hierarchy (Zancan 2026b). Those figures—what Zancan calls the 'anonymous protagonists'—might conceivably be considered as a playful Weberian critique of the growing influence of the anonymous, bureaucratic power of the Japanese state. Nevertheless, the imagery of the decorated tombs is not—to our way of seeing—explicitly critical of Yamato. The imagery employed in the decorated tombs appears abstract, mythological, sometimes even mysterious; it is certainly not political in the way that, for example, the Romans portrayed war and violence (cf. Lusnia 2020). If the decorated tombs reflect resistance, then that resistance was hidden not public (cf. Scott 1990). Such a reading might suggest that Yamato already wielded considerable power over local elites in Kyushu who, even in the dark, private spaces inside tombs, were unable to directly critique Yamato power. At the same time, the very existence of the tombs represents an apparent refusal to comply with the 'hegemonic performance' (Scott 1990: 205) of Kofun mortuary customs.

The political significance of the decorated tombs of the Kanto region is explored by Inada in Chapter 3. Inada presents the hypothesis that, after their defeat in the Iwai Rebellion, northern Kyushu local elites and their retinues were forcibly transferred to Ibaraki by the Yamato king Keitai. With experience of navigating the difficult waters between Kyushu and Korea, these groups could bring the same maritime skills to the dangerous waters off Cape Chōshi where the Kuroshio and Oyashio current meet. Inada argues that modern Ibaraki prefecture became important as a staging ground for the advance of the Yamato kingdom into eastern Honshu. The elites who had been transferred from Kyushu brought their custom of building decorated tombs with them and established a tradition of such tombs in the area. While the details of this proposal will no doubt continue to be debated, it suggests the importance of the decorated tombs in Late Kofun political networks beyond Kyushu.

The Protohistoric Past and the Making of Modern Japanese Art

Beyond their archaeological and political dimensions, the *sōshoku kofun* left a profound and enduring legacy in the history of Japanese visual culture. This ancient imperative to 'picture the invisible'—as defined as such by De Benedittis in Chapter 10—through raw material and localised resistance found a

powerful, cyclical echo centuries later. Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, modern Japanese art underwent a phase of strong rejection toward Western academicism and classical Chinese canons, such as *suibokuga* ink painting. Seeking a clean break from these dominant traditions, artists and intellectuals turned toward the prehistoric and protohistoric past (the Jōmon, Yayoi, and Kofun periods) to trace an 'original' and indigenous purity within Japanese aesthetics. The geometric motifs of the *sōshoku kofun*—such as the abstract *chokkomon* design and the stylized silhouettes of boats and horses—were reinterpreted by modernists not as primitive relics, but as pioneering forms of 'primitive abstraction'.

Furthermore, the environmental and structural reality of the tombs offered a radical new paradigm for conceptualising artistic space. The fact that these wall paintings were never conceived to be exhibited, but rather to exist eternally in the heavy darkness of the subterranean stone chamber, inspired a sacred, installation-like conception of space that profoundly influenced the sensibility of contemporary sculptors and site-specific installation artists. Simultaneously, the pure mineral pigments used in the *kofun* (ochre red, carbon black, clay white) applied directly onto the rough, unyielding stone created a vibrant, tactile texture. Post-war movements like the Gutai Group or the Mono-ha movement expressed their philosophical rebellion through an obsessive focus on raw matter, stone, and pure pigments, finding a spiritual and material counterpart precisely in this protohistoric wall art.

In more recent contemporary art and visual culture—spanning design, illustration, and architecture—this resurrected ancient lexicon has been completely internalised, transitioning from a conscious avant-garde provocation into a foundational, almost subconscious, design vocabulary. For instance, geometric patterns such as the recurring circles on the walls of the Hinooka tomb, or the highly stylised anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures reduced to two-dimensional silhouettes in the Takehara or Mezurashizuka tombs, blend seamlessly with the visual synthesis of contemporary Japanese graphic design, which relies heavily on extreme flatness and the geometrisation of forms. This is evident in the systematic, vinyl-painted circular canvases produced by Tanaka Atsuko 田中敦子(1932-2005) starting in 1957, as well as the iconic posters of Yokoo Tadanori 横尾忠則 (1936–), such as his 1967 design for the avant-garde theatrical performance Kegawa no Mari (毛皮のマリー), his promotional work for the Jōmon and Kamagure Festivals, and his 1966 masterpiece *The City and Design: The Wonders of Life on Earth*.

Yet, the modern re-activation of the Kofun period went beyond aesthetic flattened; it also channelled the latent political resistance and regional friction originally embedded in the tombs' Kyushu origins. Within the avant-garde or 'anti-art' (Han-geijutsu 反芸術) movements of the 1960s theorised by art historian KuroDalaiJee, (pseudonym of Kuroda Raiji 黒田雷児) the protohistoric past was weaponized as a tool for radical social critique. In April 1964, radical and enigmatic figures like Asai Masuo あさいます, 浅井満雄 (1942–1966) and Naka Takehisa 仲武久 (1944–1998) organised the legendary, revolutionary 'Jōmon Festival' (Jōmon-sai 縄文祭) at the Seto Civic Center. During this avant-garde event, the artists staged wild bodily performances, ephemeral mud installations, and earth-bound tribal rituals. Their explicit intent was to reclaim the visceral aesthetic violence and sexual-ritual freedom of the prehistoric Jōmon and Kofun eras, unleashing it as a weapon of mass destruction against the stifling bourgeois respectability of post-war contemporary Japan.

Ultimately, this cyclical trajectory demonstrates how the *sōshoku kofun* transitioned from being the forgotten relics of an ancient funerary cult to becoming living archetypes of contemporary expressive freedom. By tracing a direct line from the subterranean chambers of Kyushu to the anti-art happenings of the 1960s and the flat planes of modern graphic design, it becomes clear that the future of contemporary Japanese art is continuously and paradoxically being re-imagined through the

excavation and reactivation of its most remote past. The history of Japanese visual culture does not move in a straight line; rather, it loops backward to move forward.

Volume Organisation

The volume is structured around three thematic parts, each approaching Japanese decorated tombs from a distinct but complementary point. Together, they aim to provide a comprehensive account of these peculiar distinctive funerary monuments, spanning their archaeological documentation and regional trajectories, the interpretation of their iconographic programmes, and their place within wider global funerary traditions. Each chapter is accompanied by a Japanese abstract to facilitate engagement with the research among Japanese-speaking scholars.

Part I: Fieldwork, Documentation, and Regional Development

Part I establishes the empirical and contextual foundations of the volume, drawing on the research of archaeologists directly engaged in the study and documentation of decorated tombs, including through the application of emerging digital methodologies. The contributions trace the origins and the development of the phenomenon, their social implications, examine the meanings of its earliest iconographies, and chart its development from Kyushu to other parts of the archipelago.

The opening contribution by Sakaguchi (Chapter 1) examines the macro-evolution of decorated tombs between the fifth and eighth centuries, categorising over 850 sites into four distinct structural types. Analysing the diffusion of *chokkomon* (straight-line and arc) and other motifs, the author links the rise of rock-cut tombs to the common people and the centralisation of the Yamato polity, proposing a compelling hypothesis of state-sponsored population relocation to the Tohoku coast. Following this regional trajectory, Yoshida (Chapter 2) focuses on northern Kyushu between the mid-fourth and late sixth centuries, tracing active inter-regional exchanges through three distinct patterns of decorative adoption. This chapter identifies a significant functional shift in the placement of decorations, moving from an intimate iconography addressed to the deceased to one explicitly targeted at the mourners. The third contribution, by Inada (Chapter 3), turns to Ibaraki Prefecture, a key area of concentration for decorated tombs, where strong iconographic and compositional conventions parallel those found in Kyushu, over 1,000 kilometres away. Highlighting the early seventh-century Torazuka Tomb the chapter argues that these striking material links reflect the strategic settlement of Kyushu seafaring groups, deployed by the Yamato kingdom as a vanguard for northward expansion. Finally, Loftus (Chapter 4) shifts the focus to the Tokyo area, introducing a distinct group of decorated tunnel tombs while demonstrating the pivotal role of digital technologies in archaeological documentation. Utilising ultra-high-resolution structured-light 3D scanning on an engraved slab from the Fudōbashi tomb group, the study recovers nuanced, multi-phase production sequences and surface interactions that conventional methods frequently overlook.

Part II: Iconography, Belief, and Interpretation

Part II adopts a more interpretive orientation, engaging with the iconographic repertoire of decorated tombs through theoretical and cognitive frameworks. The contributions function collectively as case studies demonstrating how a coherent critical approach may be applied across comparable archaeological contexts, while entering into dialogue around questions of belief, cosmology, and mortuary custom. These four chapters challenge previous scholarship, proposing new interpretations and possible approaches to the study of the *sōshoku kofun*.

Thierfelder's contribution (Chapter 5) centres on the circular motif—the oldest and most widely diffused decorative element in Japanese decorated tombs—and traces how its significance evolved over time, with particular attention to its possible cosmological resonances. Cautioning against single-meaning interpretations, the chapter argues that circular motifs operated within a polysemous, context-dependent symbolic system, functioning above all as apotropaic devices within the funerary sphere. Chapter 6 and 7 are complementary. Chapter 6 by Zancan investigates the equestrian iconography across a corpus of 69 iconographies identified in 38 *sōshoku kofun*, dating from the sixth to the mid-seventh century. Through a mixed quantitative and qualitative method, it proposes a new and more precise taxonomy and reassesses a number of attributions found in previous scholarship. The analysis reveals significant regional variation in the rendering of the horse across the archipelago, pointing to the existence of distinct local traditions within a shared funerary repertoire. Contrary to previous scholarship, the evidence does not support an absolute association between equestrian imagery and post-mortem belief, suggesting that the meaning of these depictions varied considerably depending on context. By comparing various media, Chapter 7 by Stein re-evaluates the role of equestrian imagery in the Late Kofun period by adopting a comparative approach that integrates depictions from decorated tombs, pottery, *haniwa* figurines, and Sue ware. Focusing on regional variation between Northern Kyushu and Kanto, the chapter introduces fresh insights into the depiction of grooms (*uma-hiki*) and examines interregional interactions and centre-periphery relationships, contributing to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of ancient Japan. Finally, Chapter 8, contributed by Bartocci, addresses the relationship between colour and drawing in mural decorations, examining how material availability, regional factors, and funerary rank determined technical choices over time. Drawing on combined archaeological and archaeometric data, the chapter traces a fluid shift from early tombs, where colour functions as a continuous chromatic field from which forms emerge, to later ones organised by preliminary black ink drawings, demonstrating that Kofun-period painting operated as a deeply relational visual system.

Part III: Global Perspectives and Continental Connections

Part III situates Japanese decorated tombs within a broader comparative framework, exploring iconographic parallels and possible connections with funerary traditions beyond the archipelago. By moving from global, macro-historical comparisons to direct, transregional networks within East Asia, these final contributions challenge insular perspectives and reframe *sōshoku kofun* as a significant phenomenon within the wider history of human visual and mortuary culture.

Kawano's chapter (Chapter 9) offers a wide comparative perspective, situating Japanese decorated tumuli within a comparative archaeology of funerary representation and applying a five-variable analytical framework across traditions from Egypt and China to Mesoamerica and Koguryŏ, with a view to integrating Japanese decorated tombs into wider discussions of death, imagery, and social order in human history. De Benedittis (Chapter 10) introduces the painted tombs of the Koguryŏ Kingdom on the Korean Peninsula, reconstructing afterlife imaginaries. This contribution provides the contextual framework necessary for understanding the similarities and differences between the two traditions, prompting reflection on the role of cross-peninsular contact in shaping Kyushu's decorated tomb culture. By tracing a diachronic shift from early biographical scenes of daily life to later abstract, cosmological programmes dominated by tutelary deities, the author demonstrates how these murals actively constructed a sacred space to picture the invisible. The closing contribution (Chapter 11), by Lázár, examines the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs—decorated tombs distinct from the other *sōshoku kofun* yet deeply embedded in continental traditions—and through an analysis of their origins and iconographic programmes elucidates the longer arc of tomb decoration practices in Japan and the

enduring significance of exchange with the continent. Focusing on cosmological imagery such as the Four Gods and star charts, the study demonstrates how the Asuka court actively adapted and localised these East Asian motifs rather than passively imitating them.

The contributions gathered in this volume collectively attest to the richness and complexity of *sōshoku kofun* as objects of scholarly inquiry. It is the editors' hope that this collection will both deepen understanding of these remarkable monuments and stimulate new comparative research across disciplinary and cultural boundaries.

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PART I:

FIELDWORK, DOCUMENTATION,

AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF DECORATED TOMBS IN JAPAN

KEITARŌ SAKAGUCHI[1]

(TRANSLATED BY CLAUDIA ZANCAN)

This paper examines the evolution of Japanese decorated tombs between the fifth and seventh centuries, analysing their developmental processes, regional transitions, and the political implications of motif diffusion. Categorising 851 identified sites into four types—stone-coffin, stone-slab, mural, and rock-cut tombs—this study argues that the latter, comprising 60% of the total, served the common people, thereby possessing a distinct social significance apart from elite tombs. The research demonstrates that the emergence of these tombs was intrinsically linked to the centralisation of the Yamato polity. By tracing the transmission of chokkomon *(straight-line and arc) motifs, the paper clarifies political alliances between the central court and regional clans in the Kibi, Hokuriku and Tsukushi regions. Furthermore, it proposes a compelling migration hypothesis: the abrupt appearance of Kyushu-specific geometric and figurative motifs along the Tohoku coastline suggests a systematic relocation of populations by the Yamato state for military and colonial purposes. The study concludes that the persistence of decorated rock-cut tombs into the eighth century—long after the central decline of kofun construction—reflects a conscious effort by migrant communities to preserve their cultural identity amidst the transition to the unified Ritsuryō state.*

Keywords: *Decorated Kofun, Yamato Polity, Rock-Cut Tomb, Chokkomon Motif, Ritsuryō State*

日本の装飾古墳の起源と変遷

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【概要】

本論考は、5 世紀から 7 世紀にかけて日本で展開された独自の埋葬儀礼である「装飾古墳」を対象とし、その成立過程、地域ごとの変遷、および文様の伝播から推察される古代日本の政治的動向を考察するものである。

【内容の構成】

1. 装飾古墳の定義と分類: 装飾古墳は、石室や石棺に彩色や彫刻を施したもので、全国で 851 基確認されている。本稿ではこれらを「石棺系」「石障系」「壁画系」「装飾横穴墓」の 4 つに分類する。特に、全体の約 6 割を占める「装飾横穴墓」が、当時の一般民衆（庶民）の墓であることを指摘し、支配層の古墳とは異なる社会的意義を提示する。

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2. ヤマト王権と装飾の伝播: 装飾古墳の発生には、5 世紀のヤマト王権による地方平定と中央集権化が深く関与している。初期の「石棺系」に見られる直弧文の伝播経路を分析することで、王権と地方豪族（吉備：現岡山や北陸：現福井、筑紫：現福岡南部など）との政治的結びつきを明らかにする。

3. 九州から東北への集団移住仮説: 本稿の核心として、6 世紀から 7 世紀における九州から関東・東北地方への大規模な移住（開拓民）を提唱する。九州各地に固有の装飾文様（熊本の幾何学文、福岡の具象画など）が、後に装飾文様として東北の沿岸部に突如出現する事実に着目した。これはヤマト王権による東北支配の一環として、九州の民衆が兵役や開拓団として組織的に移住させられた結果であると推策する。

4. 葬送儀礼と民衆の尊厳: 7 世紀、中央では律令国家への移行に伴い古墳造営が終焉を迎えるが、遠隔地の移住者たちは 8 世紀に至るまで装飾横穴墓の造営を継続した。この事実は、公的な政治体制の変化に抗い、自らの出自やアイデンティティを葬送儀礼の中に保持し続けた民衆の精神文化の表れであると結論づける。

【結論】

日本の装飾古墳は、単なる美術的遺産にとどまらず、古代東アジアの日本という島国における人々の移動と倭という連合部族国家がヤマト王権による日本統一を物語る貴重な歴史証拠である。本論考を通じて、エトルリア壁画古墳とも比肩しうる、東アジア独自の岩壁美術の価値を再定義したい。

キーワード: 装飾古墳、装飾横穴墓、直弧文、辟邪、ヤマト王権、筑紫君磐井、集団移住、葬送儀礼とアイデンティティ

Japanese Decorated Tombs

Sōshoku kofun (decorated tombs) are a form of Japanese funerary practice in which ornamental patterns were applied to the interior or exterior of burial facilities—including stone chambers, stone-coffins, and rock-cut tombs—using techniques such as relief carving, incised engraving, polychrome painting, and pecking. These tombs span the fifth to seventh centuries (Sakaguchi 1998). Of the approximately 200,000 Kofun tombs believed to exist throughout Japan, 851 have been identified as decorated tombs.[2]

Classification and Decorative Techniques of Decorated Tombs

Decorated tombs fall broadly into four categories (Table 1). The stone-coffin type (*sekkan-kei*) is the earliest, appearing in the late fourth century. In this type, circular patterns, straight-line and arc motifs (*chokkomon*), and similar apotropaic patterns are carved in relief on the lid or body of the coffin to ward off evil (Hamada, Umehara and Shimada 1919; Saga Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1973; Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan 1993).[3] Subsequently, the stone-slab type (*sekishō-kei*) was adopted in the fifth

[2] Data confirmed by the Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs as of April 2026.
[3] Many researchers believe that the motifs in decorated tombs were painted with the intent to protect the deceased and repel evil spiritual entities.

century as the burial facility of minor chieftains along the coast of the Yatsushiro Sea in central Kyushu.[4] The interior surfaces of these structures, composed of assembled stone-slabs, are decorated with relief carvings of grave goods such as bronze mirrors, swords, shields, and quivers (*yugi*).[5] Their distribution eventually extends as far north as northern Kyushu. Mural-type decorated tombs (*hekiga-kei*) began to be constructed in the first half of the sixth century in northern Kyushu. In this region, situated close to the East Asian mainland, the influence of the mural tombs of Koguryŏ is apparent (Tamari 1984): in addition to the earlier apotropaic imagery, narrative compositions incorporating Taoist and other religious elements came to be depicted. Finally, both decorated (*yokoana-kei sōshoku kofun*) and simple rock-cut tombs served as communal family burial sites for the commoners of the period.[6] The tombs of rulers in this period were predominantly mounded tombs, whose scale was proportional to the wealth and power of those interred within them. Ordinary people, by contrast, made no display of power or wealth, and were buried mostly in pit tombs without mounded superstructures.

Table 1: Classification of Decorated Tombs and Decorative Techniques.

Classification	Location of Decoration	Technique	Period
Stone-coffin (*sekkan-kei*)	Exterior of lid and body	Relief carving; incised engraving	Late 4th – 5th century
Stone-slabs (*sekishō-kei*)	Interior face of stone-slab/partition	Relief carving; incised engraving; polychrome painting	5th – late 6th century
Mural/painting tomb (*hekiga-kei*)	Rear wall and side walls of stone chamber	Polychrome painting; incised engraving; pecking	Early 6th – late 7th century
Rock-cut tomb (*yokoana-kei*)	Cliff face or rear/side walls of tomb chamber	Relief carving; incised engraving; polychrome painting	Early 6th – 8th century

In Kyushu and certain other regions, rather than constructing pit tombs, people commonly excavated horizontal rock-cuts into cliffsides to create burial chambers. In Kumamoto, in northern Kyushu in particular, approximately 87% of all decorated tombs belong to this type.[7] From the first half of the sixth century onwards, as large numbers of decorated tombs were being constructed throughout Kyushu,

[4] The *sekishō* consists of flat stone-slabs arranged in a rectangular configuration and is regarded as a development of the box-shaped stone-coffin. It has no lid and is built into the stone chamber; it is affixed to the chamber interior.

[5] The *yugi* (or *yuki*) is a portable quiver carried by soldiers on their backs during military campaigns. It is represented in *haniwa* clay figurines and armoured stone figures (*busō sekijin*).

[6] Decorated rock-cut tombs (*yokoana-kei*) are tombs with an entrance cut into a cliff face. Widely adopted in Kyushu during the sixth century, they served as communal family burial sites for ordinary people.

[7] A large number of rock-cut tombs were constructed in the Kikuchi River basin in Kumamoto Prefecture. Of the 118 decorated tombs confirmed in this area, chieftain tombs account for 3 examples (2.5%), round tombs of secondary rank for 8%, and rock-cut tombs for 87%. Given that rock-cut tombs served as family burial sites, they were evidently widespread as tombs for 'ordinary people' throughout the Kikuchi River basin at the time.

decorative motifs began to appear also in the rock-cut tombs of commoners. Shields, quivers, and human figures were painted beside the entrances to these tombs as apotropaic imagery. Circular patterns and continuous triangular motifs were also frequently depicted around the rim of the tomb entrance. Some examples feature an interior stone structure (*ishiyakata,* stone house-shaped coffin) modelled on the burial chambers of tombs. The decorated rock-cut tomb is the most frequently constructed type, accounting for over sixty per cent of all decorated burial mounds (Table 2).

Table 2: Decorated Tombs in the Kikuchi River Basin.

Type	Number	Proportion
Keyhole-shaped tomb (*zenpōkōenfun*)	3	2.5%
Round tomb (*enpun*)	10	8%
Rock-cut tomb (*yokoana*)	102	87%
Box-type stone-coffins (*hakoshiki sekkan*)	3	2.5%
Total	118	100%

The Emergence and Spread of Decorated Tombs

Between the fifth century, when *sōshoku kofun* first emerged, and the sixth century, when their construction reached its peak, East Asia saw the consolidation of states such as Koguryŏ, Silla, Paekche, and Wa (Japan) (Figure 1). The fifth century, marking the beginning of *sōshoku kofun*, corresponds to the era when Japan was known as Wa; this was a period during which the Yamato polity established its authority in the Kinai region, subdued various provinces, and began to forge close diplomatic relations with other East Asian nations. It is in the vision of the author that a deep causal link exists between these socio-political conditions and the emergence of decorated *kofun*.

Evidence for this may be found in the fact that the earliest decorated stone-coffin type (*sekkan-kei*) appeared within the Kinai region—the heart of the Yamato polity—and incorporated the *chokkomon* motif. This motif originated in the Kibi region and was originally featured on *tokushu kidai* (special ritual vessels), the prototypes for cylindrical *haniwa* clay vessels. The fifth century was a transformative era in which the Yamato polity transitioned from a confederation of powerful local clans toward a centralised state centred on the figure of the Great King, specifically during the reign of King Ohodo (Emperor Keitai). This correlation is substantiated by the fact that these decorated stone-coffin types spread to the Hokuriku region—the paternal power base of this Great King, who also held influence around Lake Biwa—and subsequently appeared in Izumo and Northern Kyushu, regions where the Yamato polity was strengthening its control.



Figure 1: East Asia in the fifth and sixth centuries. (Source: the author).

As previously stated, *sōshoku kofun* followed two primary developmental routes. The first is the stone-coffin type (*sekkan-kei*), originating from the Anpukuji sarcophagus in the Kinai region; the second is the stone-slab type (*sekishō-kei*), derived from the box-shaped stone-coffins (*hakoshiki sekkan*) that originated around the Yatsushiro Sea in Kyushu. The origin and dissemination of these two lineages are summarised in Figure 2.

Examining each region in turn: firstly, the stone-coffin type moved from the Kinai to the Hokuriku region. Hokuriku is regarded as the birthplace of Great King (*Ōkimi*) Keitai, who reigned in the first half of the sixth century. From Hokuriku—the political power base of this monarch—the stone-coffin type spread to Izumo at the end of the fourth century and further extended to Kyushu during the first half of the fifth century. It is of profound interest that the Sekijinsan Tomb (Figure 3), presumed to be the tomb of the father of Tsukushi-no-kimi Iwai (who would later contest Yamato hegemony with Emperor Keitai), features a stone-coffin type burial decorated with a *chokkomon* motif. To expand upon the aforementioned origins of *chokkomon*, this motif was rooted in the ornamentation of *tokushu kidai* (special ritual vessels) from the Kibi region. The beginning of the Kofun period is defined by the emergence of keyhole-shaped tombs (*zenpōkōenfun*) in the mid-third century, where the placement of cylindrical *haniwa* became an indispensable element of funerary ritual. The adoption of the Kibi *chokkomon* motif for such critical ceremonial purposes during the formative phase of the Yamato polity—and its subsequent application to stone-coffin ornamentation—strongly suggests that the Kibi clans were a foundational component of the coalition supporting Yamato authority. Consequently, these decorated *kofun* serve as material evidence of a direct lineage to the early Yamato court. This

particular stone-coffin tradition eventually declined and disappeared in the aftermath of the Iwai Rebellion.

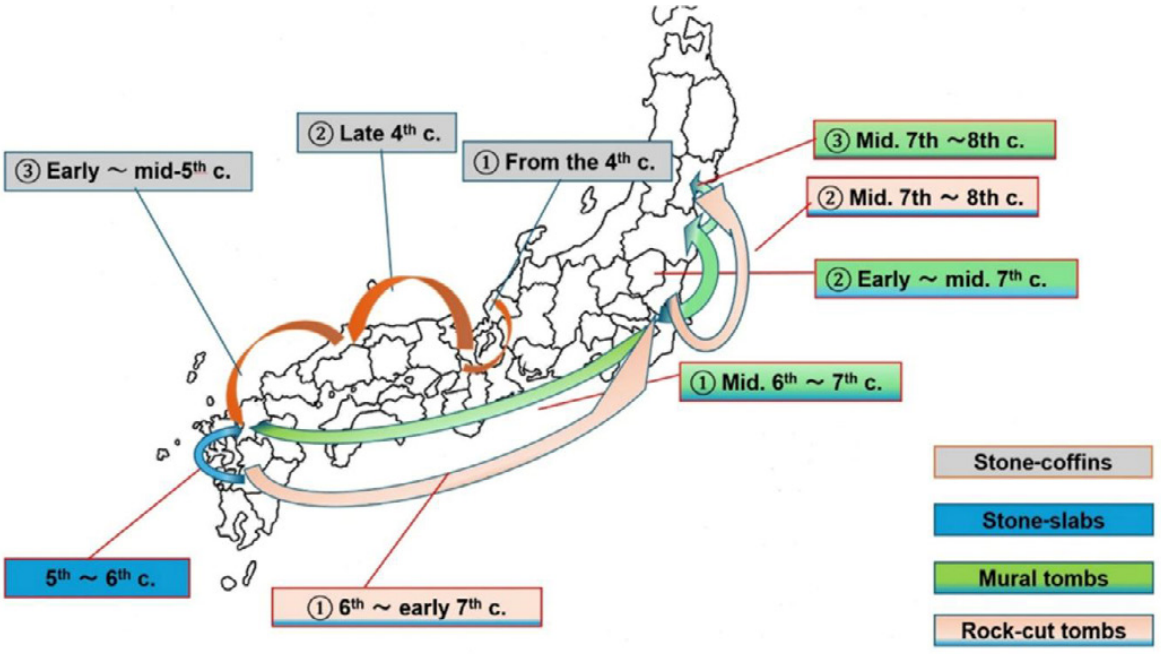

Figure 2: The Evolution of Decorated Kofun. (Source: the author).

The other lineage, the stone-slab type (*sekishō-kei*), appeared along the coast of the Yatsushiro Sea in central Kyushu. In these burial facilities for small circular mounds (*enpun*), the interior surfaces of box-shaped stone-coffins were decorated with relief carvings of grave goods, such as bronze mirrors, long swords, shields, and quivers (Figure 4). By the mid-fifth century, this style reached the Uto Peninsula, and during the latter half of the fifth century, it spread to the Kumamoto Plain (Kumamoto-ken 2020). It was here that decorative patterns began to be rendered in colours such as red, white, yellow, and grey. Geometric patterns, including *chokkomon* and concentric circles, dominated the motifs, while figurative drawings like shields became less common. The construction of these stone barriers ceased around the beginning of the sixth century with the emergence of burial facilities known as *ishiyakata* (stone house-shaped coffin) at the rear of corridor-style stone chambers (*yokoanashiki sekishitsu*) (Yoshida 2025). Concentric circles, rhomboids, figures, and houses began to be depicted on the interior surfaces of these stone houses, the most famous example being the Chibusan Tomb in Yamaga City, Northern Kyushu (Figure 5 A).

The mural-type (*hekiga-kei*) decorated tomb (Figure 5 B) successively spread throughout Fukuoka Prefecture in the first half of the sixth century. Although this mural lineage reached the Kanto region in the seventh century, its construction ended within the first half of that century.

Finally, decorated rock-cut tombs (*yokoana-kei*) (Figure 6) began to be constructed in the sixth century, primarily in Northern Kyushu, with a high concentration in the Kikuchi River basin. In the seventh century, they began to be built in large numbers in Kanto, and by the mid-seventh century, along the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region. While the construction of *kofun* tombs and decorated rock-cut tombs

ceased in Kyushu by the first half of the seventh century, the building of decorated rock-cut tombs continued in Kanto and Tohoku even into the eighth century.



Figure 3: The stone-coffin type: Sekijinsan Tomb (fifth century), Hirokawa Town, Fukuoka Prefecture, showing a *chokkomon* motif (straight-and-curved patterns). (Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs).



Figure 4: The stone-slab type: Odara Tomb (fifth century), Uki City, Kumamoto Prefecture. (Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs)



Figure 5: The mural type: (A) Chibusan Tomb (sixth century), Yamaga City, Kumamoto Prefecture, and its painted *ishiyakata*. (Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs); (B) Kajiyama Tomb (seventh century), Tottori City, Tottori Prefecture, depicting a fish and concentric circle motifs. (Photograph by the author).



Figure 6: The rock-cut type: Nabeta Tomb (sixth century), Yamaga City, Kumamoto Prefecture, depicting an anthropomorphic figure and weapons. (Kumamoto Prefectural Museum of Decorated Tombs).

Yamato Court Control of Tohoku as Revealed Through Decorative Techniques and Distribution

The breakdown of the 851 identified sites is presented in Table 3 and shown in Figure 7. As the table indicates, decorated rock-cut tombs constitute 60% of the total. They constitute 22% of decorated Tombs in Kyushu, but 25% in Kanto and Tohoku—surpassing the Kyushu figure. While these represent 22% of the sites in Kyushu, their prevalence in the Kanto and Tohoku regions is notably higher at 25%. Conversely, while mural-type decorated *kofun* account for 167 sites (19%) in Kyushu, they are entirely absent from the regions north of Kanto. Based on this distributional pattern, the author proposes the following hypothesis.

The decorative motifs applied to *kofun* and rock-cut tombs served both as apotropaic symbols—intended to ward off evil—and as pictorial representations of the deceased's earthly life and spiritual culture.[8] This custom reflects a shared cultural conception of death that transcended the social strata between the ruling elite and the common people in Kyushu. During the sixth century, having brought Kyushu under its hegemony, the Yamato polity sought to strengthen its grip on the regions north of Kanto. The author posits that the central authority conscripted soldiers from various Kyushu clans, organised

[8] Apotropaic warding, a concept originating in ancient China, holds that upturned or wide-open eyes possess spiritual power capable of repelling evil. In Japan, this motif appears as early as the Yayoi period (roughly contemporary with the early centuries AD) on *dōtaku* ritual bronze bells. In decorative motifs, this expression appears in depictions of the eyes of human figures and is therefore noted here separately from the related concept of *hekija* (辟邪).

logistics within Kanto, and subsequently deployed these groups as settler-colonists along the Pacific coast of Tohoku.

Table 3: Distribution of decorated tombs by region and type based on Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025.

Region	Stone-coffin Type	Stone-slab Type	Mural Type	Rock-cut Tomb	Underground-style corridor tomb	Other
Tohoku			1	82		
Kanto			15	139		
Hokuriku	5			6		
Tokai	1			6		1
Kinki	3		13	28		2
Chugoku	5	1	53	16		8
Shikoku	1		16			
Kyushu	28	7	167	190	54	3
Total	**43**	**8**	**265**	**467**	**54**	**14**
					Total	**851**

Evidence for this migration is found in the regional specificity of sixth-century Kyushu decorative repertoire: Kumamoto is characterised by geometric patterns such as concentric circles and continuous triangles; Fukuoka features elaborate narrative scenes of warriors, shamans, horses, and hunting; Oita depicts foliage; and Miyazaki displays architectural forms and spiritual figures. While these styles were absent from Kanto in the early sixth century, decorated tombs began to emerge there between the late sixth and early seventh centuries. In Kanagawa and Chiba, decorated *kofun* are non-existent, replaced entirely by decorated rock-cut tombs featuring figures, houses, horses, and triangular patterns—motifs clearly influenced by the traditions of Fukuoka, Kumamoto, and Miyazaki. In Ibaraki, both decorated mounded tombs and rock-cut tombs appear, exhibiting influences from the same Kyushu regions through depictions of long swords, quivers, circles, and lattice patterns.

Simultaneously, from the late sixth to the late seventh century, the Tohoku region—specifically the coastal areas of Fukushima and Miyagi—saw the exclusive construction of decorated rock-cut tombs. These sites feature spiral motifs (derived from circles), architectural forms, warriors, shamans, and foliage, indicating a clear cultural transmission from Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, and partially Oita.

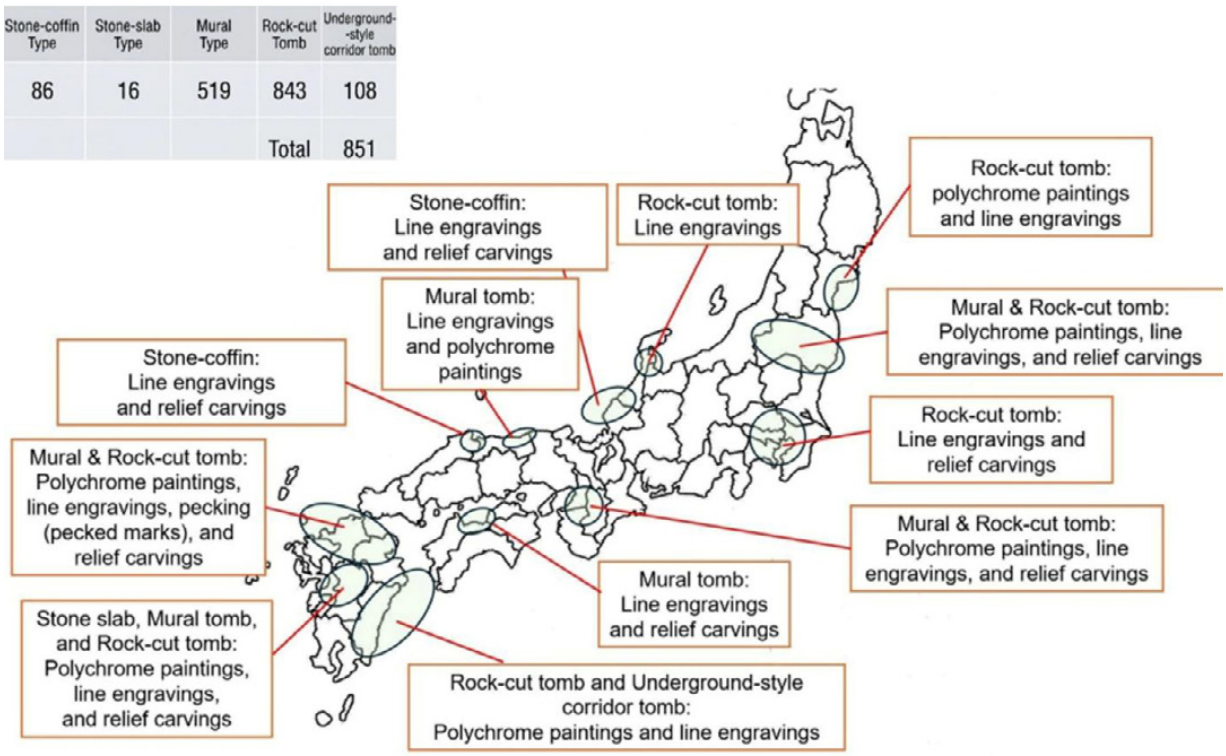

Figure 7: Number of decorated tombs and decorative techniques. (Source: the author based on Kumamoto-ken 1984; Sakaguchi 1996, 1998; Kofun Hekiga no Hozon Katsuyō ni Kansuru Kentōkai 2019).

Simultaneously, from the late sixth to the late seventh century, the Tohoku region—specifically the coastal areas of Fukushima and Miyagi—saw the exclusive construction of decorated rock-cut tombs (Figure 8). These sites feature spiral motifs (derived from circles), architectural forms, warriors, shamans, and foliage, indicating a clear cultural transmission from Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Miyazaki, and partially Oita.

As previously noted, the Kofun period was a strictly stratified society; the construction of *kofun* was a regulated privilege. Those denied such status were interred in earthen pits or rock-cut tombs. The distribution of decorated *kofun* and rock-cut tombs in Kanto and Tohoku suggests that when Kyushu clans were relocated to these regions the Yamato polity distributed both the rulers and the ruled across different areas. The author contends that this sophisticated policy resulted in a divided migration: in Kanto, both the elite and the commoners were settled in distinct residential zones. However, the pioneers sent further north to Tohoku consisted almost exclusively of the subject class. As a result, the culture of decorated tombs that the various communities of Kyushu had each carried with them came to flourish in this distant region, far removed from its place of origin.



Figure 8: Decorated rock-cut tombs in Fukushima Prefecture: (A) Izumizaki Tomb No. 4 (late sixth century), Izumizaki Village, depicting equestrian figures and *miko* (shamans); (B) Kiyotabasaku Tomb No. 76 (seventh century), Futaba Town, featuring warriors and spiral motifs. (Photographs by the author).

The Decline of Decorated Tombs and the Transition to the Ritsuryō State

The Kofun period, which began in the mid-third century, is considered to have reached its conclusion in 672 with the establishment of the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace (in present-day Asuka Village, Nara Prefecture). The Yamato polity, which had long utilised the keyhole-shaped tomb (*zenpōkōenfun*) as a symbol of authority to govern regional clans, faced internal conflicts and competition for hegemony within East Asia. In response, the leadership studied and adopted the administrative systems of the Chinese empire. By embracing these institutions, the state abandoned the *kofun*—the hallmark of the old regime—and transitioned from a system of collective governance by local clans to a centralised state under the Emperor (*tennō*), governed by the Ritsuryō legal codes and a rigid political hierarchy. This profound socio-political transformation brought about the end of decorated *kofun*, a unique artistic and cultural phenomenon born in the Japanese archipelago.

On the other hand, the populations relocated by the Yamato polity from Kyushu to the distant regions of Kanto and Tohoku continued the construction of decorated tombs—their ancestral cultural heritage—well into the eighth century, even after the Ritsuryō system was fully established. This suggests that for the common people, political structures were merely one facet of existence; it was within the funerary rites of the decorated *kofun* that they preserved and asserted their own fundamental dignity.

Concluding Remarks

The Etruscan wall-painted tombs of Italy, rendered with vivid colours through fresco techniques, depict scenes of banquets, sports, and hunting. Such magnificent artistry serves as a precious cultural asset, conveying the richness of that ancient civilisation to the modern era (Tamari 1984). Similarly, in the sixth century, Japan witnessed the construction of numerous decorated *kofun*—a distinctive form of rock art within the East Asian context. Preserving the exceptional artistic quality and historical significance of these extant decorated *kofun* for future generations is an imperative task for all of humanity.

Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DECORATED TOMBS IN NORTHERN KYUSHU AND THEIR SOCIAL BACKGROUND

TŌMEI YOSHIDA[1]

(TRANSLATED BY CLAUDIA ZANCAN)

*While decorated tombs are concentrated throughout Kyushu Island, their characteristics differ significantly between the northern and central regions. In northern Kyushu, decorated tombs of the stone-coffin (*sekkan-kei*) and stone-barrier (*sekishō-kei*) types appear sporadically and fragmentarily, suggesting a discontinuous transmission from central Kyushu. The Hinooka and Ōzuka tombs, which emerged in northern Kyushu during the early sixth century, integrated elements from other regions to create new stone chamber structures and wall decorations that differed from preceding forms. Over a period of approximately 100 years from the first half of the sixth century, numerous chamber-type decorated tombs were constructed in northern Kyushu. Their evolution can be categorised into three patterns: (1) The traditional inheritance of decorative practices within limited regions; (2) The introduction of decoration as a single element from other regions, triggered by tomb construction; (3) The comprehensive adoption of decorative practices from other regions, including the funerary system itself. Analysis of the transitions in the placement of decorations reveals a shift in the intended audience of the motifs: moving from depictions addressed to the deceased towards those explicitly targeted at the mourners. The evolution of chamber-type decorated tumuli in northern Kyushu can be viewed as the product of active and fluid inter-regional exchanges within the context of local society.*

Keywords: *Genealogy of Decorated Tombs, Stone-Chamber Structure, Creation and Development of Decorated Tombs, Iconographies Arrangement, Interregional Exchange*

北部九州の装飾古墳の展開と社会的背景

吉田東明（九州歴史資料館）

九州には装飾古墳が集中するが、北部と中部とでは様相が異なる。北部九州では石棺系・石障系装飾古墳は単発的・断片的で、中部九州から不連続に伝播したものとみられる。6 世紀前葉に北部九州に出現した日岡古墳と王塚古墳は、他地域の要素を取り込んで、従来とは異なる新たな石室構造とともに、壁面装飾を創出した。北部九州では 6 世紀前半からおよそ 100 年の間に、多くの石室系装飾古墳が築造されたが、これらの展開は、１）限られた地域内で伝統的に描画行為を継承、２）造墓を契機に他地域の描画行為を一要素として導入、３）他地域の描画行為を、墓制を墓制も含めて導入、の三つのパターンが想定される。描画場所の変遷をとおして、被葬者に対する描画から、会葬者を強く意識した描画へと、対象の変化の方向性が認められる。北部九州での石室系装飾古墳の展開は、地域社会を背景とした活発で流動的な交流の所産とみることができる。

キーワード: 装飾古墳の系譜、石室構造、創出と展開、描画場所の変化、交流

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Introduction

Decorated tombs (*sōshoku kofun*) are distributed throughout various regions of the Japanese archipelago, with approximately half of all known examples concentrated in Kyushu Island. The area spanning northern to central Kyushu—broadly corresponding to the coastal region around the Ariake Sea—is particularly well known for its high density of decorated tombs. Viewed as a whole, the Ariake Sea coastal region may be understood as a zone that fostered a coherent culture of decorated tombs. However, a closer examination reveals that the characteristics of decorated tombs are by no means uniform across northern and central Kyushu; temporal disparities in distribution and minor regional variations are clearly discernible. The present chapter outlines the development of decorated tombs with a particular focus on northern Kyushu.

The geographical definition of 'northern Kyushu' as employed in this chapter corresponds approximately to the present-day prefectures of Fukuoka, Saga, and Nagasaki, whereas the territory of Kumamoto Prefecture is considered as 'central Kyushu' (Figure 1). Detailed research has advanced considerably within central Kyushu, rendering it possible to trace developments in close detail. Nevertheless, since this chapter focuses on northern Kyushu, and since treating central Kyushu as a single contrasting entity facilitates comprehension within the present comparative framework, no further subdivision has been made.

The standard classification of Japanese decorated tombs, which focuses on burial facilities, employs four types (Kobayashi 1964) which this chapter also follows: the 'stone-coffin type' (*sekkan-kei*), the 'stone-slabs type' (*sekishō-kei*), the 'stone-chamber type' (*sekishitsu-kei*), and the 'rock-cut type' (*yokoana-kei*).[2] In terms of pictorial technique, five categories are recognised—painting, relief, incising, pecking, and carving—and this classification will be followed here (Fukuoka Prefectural Board of Education 2025).

[2] In northern Kyushu, all four typological categories are represented: 'stone-coffin type', 'stone-slabs type', 'stone-chamber type', and 'rock-cut type'. Genealogically, the first three form a continuous series, whereas the 'rock-cut type' stands apart from the other three. Accordingly, the present discussion focuses primarily on the stone-coffin, stone-slabs, and stone-chamber types; the rock-cut type is not discussed here.

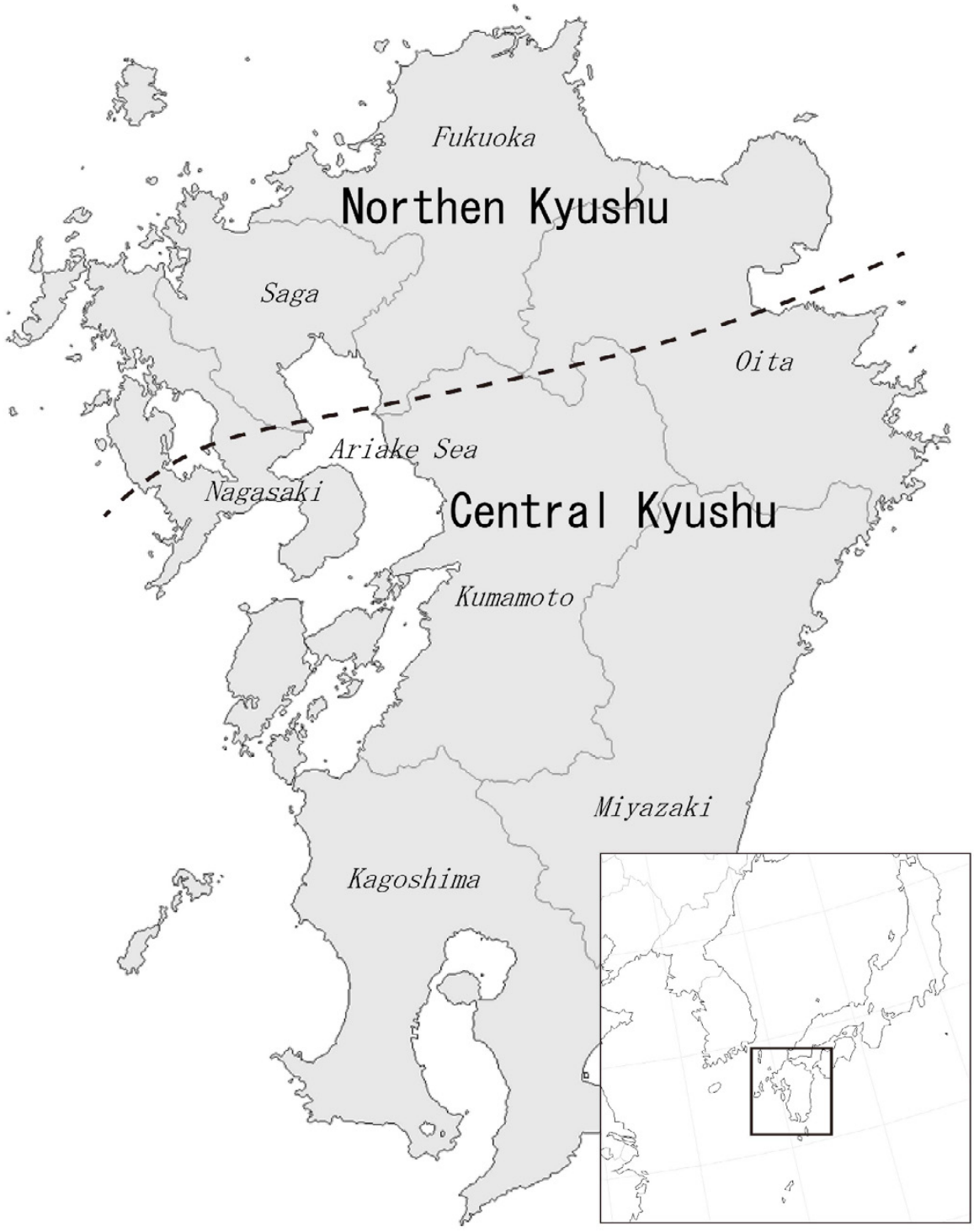

Figure 1: Location of Northern Kyushu. (Created by the author).

The Development of Decorated Tombs in Northern Kyushu

The earliest *sōshoku kofun* in northern Kyushu is the Sekijinsan Tomb (Figure 2 A).[3] Classified as a stone-coffin type decorated tomb, its decorations consist of bas-reliefs carved onto the exterior face of the coffin lid and the lateral aperture of the coffin body. The characteristic features are concentric circle motifs and elaborate *chokkomon* (straight-and-curved) patterns arranged in a regular configuration within framed sections on both lateral faces of the lid. Examples of geometrical motifs such as circle designs and *chokkomon* patterns carved or incised on coffin lids are attested throughout western Japan from the fourth century onwards, and the stone coffin of the Sekijinsan Tomb is regarded as a representative example among them. The gable-entrance horizontal-aperture house-shaped stone coffin incorporates the technique of the horizontal stone chamber (*yokoanashiki sekishitsu*)—which was adopted along the Genkai Sea coast from the late fourth to the early fifth centuries—into the construction of a stone coffin, yielding a structure that, like the horizontal stone chamber, was designed to accommodate successive interments.

In addition to Sekijinsan, two further decorated tombs are classified as the stone-coffin type. The Urayama Tomb (Figure 2 B) features incised decoration consisting of concentric circle motifs and *chokkomon* (straight-line and arc) patterns on the inner rear and side walls of its gable-entry house-shaped stone coffin.[4] Additionally, key-handle (*kagite*) motifs are present on both the inner and outer faces of the front wall, as well as on the lateral face of the closing slab. The decoration of Urayama differs from that of Sekijinsan and most other stone coffins in that it was applied to the interior surface, suggesting the motifs were intended for the deceased. This inward-facing decoration belongs to the lineage of stone-coffin and stone-barrier (*sekishō*) type decorated tombs that underwent a unique development in central Kyushu during the fifth century. Consequently, despite both being stone-coffin type decorated tumuli, the Urayama and Sekijinsan coffins are situated within distinct genealogical branches. The Nishikuma Tomb features incised ornamentation consisting of circular motifs and continuous triangular patterns on the front face of the coffin lid and to the left and right of the horizontal aperture.[5]

The concentration of motifs around the aperture can be interpreted as a deliberate layout designed to be clearly visible from the exterior during subsequent interments.

In the three aforementioned examples of house-shaped stone coffins with horizontal apertures distributed across northern Kyushu, the coffins are housed within an enclosing stone chamber. In central Kyushu, however, such coffins were generally placed directly on the ground without the construction of a stone chamber (Wakasugi 1997). While northern Kyushu adopted the horizontal-aperture stone coffin style introduced from central Kyushu, the region did not adopt the associated burial customs in their entirety. Instead, in accordance with local funerary traditions, a stone chamber was first constructed to house the coffin.

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[3] Sekijinsan Tomb 石人山古墳: Located in Ichijō, Hirokawa-machi, Yame-gun, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb measuring 107 m in total length. A pit-style horizontal-entrance stone chamber was constructed at the centre of the rear circular mound, inside which a gable-entrance horizontal-aperture house-shaped stone coffin made of Aso tuff was installed. Dated to the first half of the fifth century.

[4] Urayama Tomb 浦山古墳: Located in Kamitsu-machi, Kurume City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb measuring 60 m in total length, with a gable-entrance horizontal-aperture house-shaped stone coffin made of Aso tuff installed within a horizontal-entrance stone chamber. Constructed in the second half of the fifth century.

[5] Nishikuma Tomb 西隈古墳: Located in Kinryū-machi, Saga City, Saga Prefecture. A large circular tomb with a diameter of 40 m, with a horizontal-aperture house-shaped stone coffin installed within a horizontal-entrance stone chamber. Constructed towards the end of the fifth century.



Figure 2: Stone-coffin type decorated tombs: (A) Sekijinsan Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1977); (B) Urayama Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1977).



Figure 3: Stone-slab type decorated tomb: Nichirinji Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1975).

The Nichirinji Tomb (Figure 3) is the unique example of a stone-slabs (*sekishō-kei*) type decorated tomb in northern Kyushu.[6] On the stone barriers at the base of the chamber walls, a series of alternating key-handle (*kagite)* and concentric circle motifs are applied via deep incisions. During this period, horizontal stone chambers featuring stone barriers were not common in northern Kyushu; therefore, both the ornamentation and the chamber structure of the Nichirinji Tomb are considered to have been adopted from central Kyushu.

The *sōshoku kofun* of northern and central Kyushu, which exhibit genealogical continuity into the Middle and Late Kofun periods, originated in the coastal area along the northern shores of the Yatsushiro Sea in southern Kumamoto Prefecture (Takagi 1999; Yanagisawa 2022). In the beginning, decorations consisted of small circular motifs—either incised or in relief—applied to the stone coffins and stone barriers of small-to-medium-sized tumuli. Over time, the repertoire of motifs expanded to include *chokkomon* and figurative representations of various weapons, armour, and boats. From the mid-fifth century onwards, while the geographical distribution expanded, the decorative process evolved towards the use of multi-coloured pigments to distinguish different sections of the design. This entire process—from the emergence of these decorative forms to their subsequent stylistic evolution—took place within the confines of central Kyushu during the fifth century.

On the contrary, the three above-mentioned tombs located in northern Kyushu lack any local precursor or subsequent lineage within the region; they represent a discontinuous transmission from central Kyushu, occurring in a manner akin to 'isolated outbreaks'. Although northern Kyushu features representative examples of stone-coffin type decorated tombs, it was central Kyushu that played the leading role in the emergence and later development of decorated tombs during the fifth century. Northern Kyushu is, therefore, more appropriately positioned as a region that was indirectly influenced by these developments. All three stone-coffin type decorated tombs in northern Kyushu were local chieftain tombs and are considered to have been introduced from central to northern Kyushu based on 'political alliances or confederate relations formed among the chieftain classes of the Ariake Sea coastal region' (Yanagisawa 1987). However, these instances remained isolated and fragmentary, failing to act as a catalyst for any significant transformation of funerary systems within northern Kyushu.

From the late fifth century onwards, examples began to appear in central Kyushu of a stone-coffin-like funerary structure derived from the horizontal-aperture house-shaped coffin, known as the *ishiyakata*. Placed at the rear of horizontal stone chambers, the *ishiyakata* functioned as an 'open coffin' that lacked a closing device at its entrance and was exposed to the outside world; in its early stages, the ornamentation of these structures was confined strictly to the internal walls (Wada 1986; Kurafuji 1997; Takagi 2012). In northern Kyushu during the early sixth century, by contrast, stone-chamber type decorated tombs emerged, featuring polychrome motifs applied directly onto the walls of the horizontal stone chambers. This style subsequently became established and permeated the regional funerary culture. Among the decorated tombs of this period, two are of particular importance, as they served as the precursors for the subsequent evolution of decorated tombs across northern Kyushu: the Hinooka Tomb (Figure 4), situated in the southern part of northern Kyushu, and the Ōzuka Tomb (Figure 5), situated in the north.

[6] Nichirinji Tomb 日輪寺古墳: Located in Kyōmachi, Kurume City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb approximately 50 m in total length, with stone-partition slabs of Aso tuff arranged along the lower section of the horizontal-entrance stone chamber walls. Constructed at the end of the fifth century to the beginning of the sixth century.

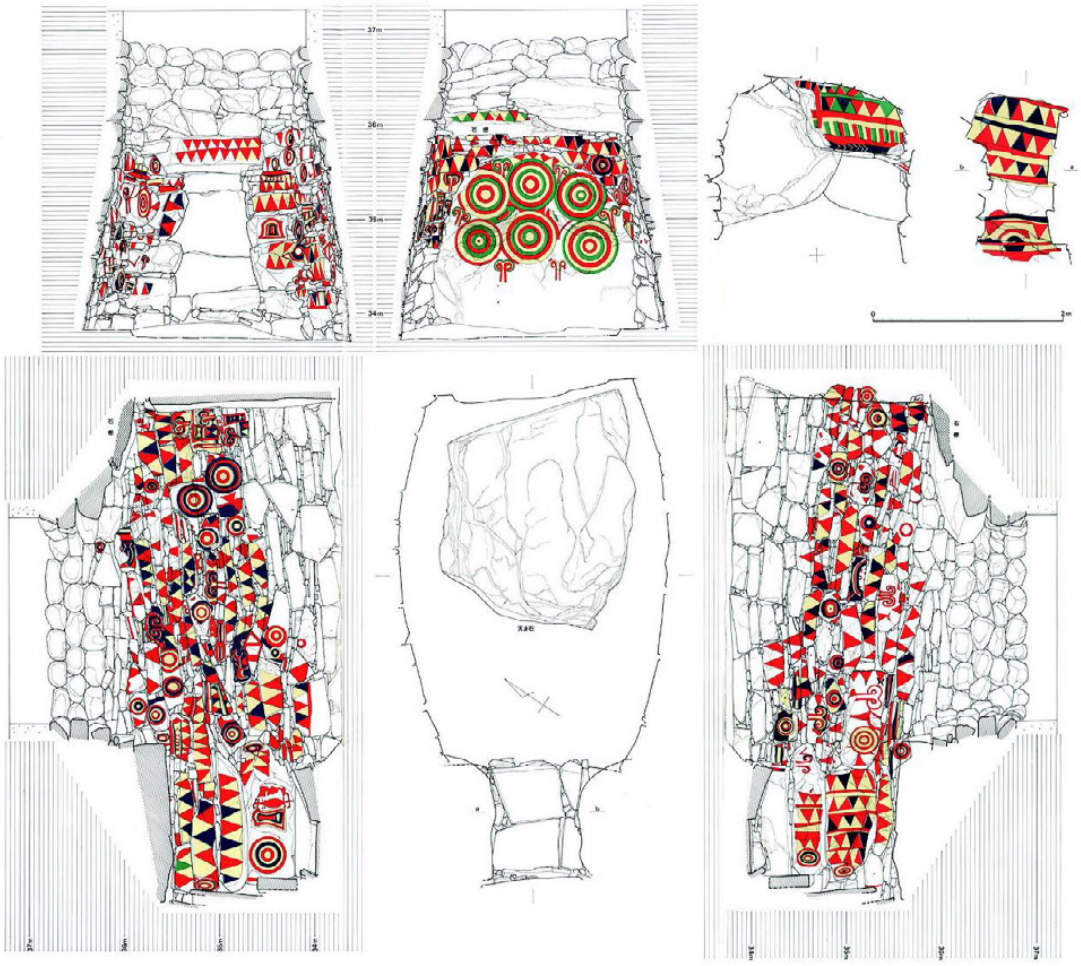

Figure 4: Planimetry and plans of Hinooka Tomb. (Reproduced from Yoshii Town Board of Education 1989, Wakamiya Kofun Group I).

The Hinooka Tomb (Figure 4) features depictions extending across the entire surface of its horizontal stone chamber walls.[7] Four pigments—red, green, white, and grey—were employed to depict a repertoire of motifs including concentric circles, triangles, *warabitemon* (bracken-fern) patterns, shields, quivers, long swords, a boat, and a horse. A defining characteristic is the presence of six large concentric circles arranged in two horizontal rows across the expansive rear wall.

The Ōzuka Tomb (Figure 5) has motifs painted on the walls of the burial stone chamber using six pigments: red, black, green, white, yellow, and grey.[8] The decorative programme extends not only to the *ishiyakata*—placed against the rear wall of the burial chamber—but also to the lamp-stand stone

[7] Hinooka Tomb 日岡古墳: Located in Wakamiya, Ukiha City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb measuring 74 m in total length, with a single-chambered barrel-vaulted horizontal-entrance stone chamber fitted with a stone shelf (*ishidana*) at the rear wall. Constructed in the early to first half of the sixth century.

[8] Ōzuka Tomb 王塚古墳: Located in Jumyō, Keisen-machi, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb measuring 86 m in total length, with a multi-chambered horizontal-entrance stone chamber constructed within the rear circular mound. An *ishiyakata*, a lamp-stand stone (*tōmyōdai-ishi*), and a stone shelf were placed against the rear wall of the inner chamber. Constructed in the first half of the sixth century.

(*tōmyōdai-ishi*), the upper stone shelf (*ishidana*), and the ceiling—reaching as far as the rear wall of the antechamber. The side walls of the burial chamber are covered with dense, continuous triangular patterns interspersed with weaponry such as quivers, bows, shields, and swords; the *ishiyakata* and lamp-stand stone are decorated with triangular motifs as well as *warabitemon* and *sōkyakurinjōmon* (double-legged ring) motifs. From the upper section of the chamber to the ceiling, yellow spherical motifs are scattered over a ground entirely coated with red pigment. The antechamber was decorated only on its rear wall, with equestrian figures depicted on the two gatepost stones (*sodeishi*), surrounded by concentric circles, *warabitemon*, triangles, and *sōkyakurinjōmon* motifs. In terms of the range of decoration, the variety of motif types, and the number of colours employed, the Ōzuka Tomb stands without equal among all known *sōshoku kofun*.

These two tombs that emerged in northern Kyushu convey a sense of having made a significant leap from the lineage of decorated tombs that had developed in central Kyushu until that point. Regarding the placement of the depictions, whereas motifs had previously been confined strictly to the internal walls of the *ishiyakata*, the range expanded greatly to cover the entire surface of the horizontal stone chamber walls. The use of colour was also diverse: four pigments at Hinooka, six at Ōzuka. The six colours of the Ōzuka Tomb represent the highest number among all polychrome decorated tombs in Japan. Furthermore, regarding the motifs, new forms of expression previously unseen have emerged, such as *warabitemon*, *sōkyakurinjōmon*, horses, birds, boats, and fish. For these reasons, these two decorated tumuli are evaluated as representing a 'major turning point for subsequent decorated tombs' (Yanagisawa 2022).

Such unique funerary structures appearing in northern Kyushu were newly conceived through the integration of elements from other regions. The planar morphology of the Hinooka Tomb, characterised by the outward curvature of the stone chamber's side walls, is termed a 'barrel-shaped chamber' (*dōbarishiki sekishitsu*). This design is positioned as the prototype for the stone chamber structures that would later proliferate across the Chikugo region during the Late Kofun period. This distinctive plan form—defined above all by the rounded swelling of the chamber's side walls—did not emerge as an entirely novel design. Rather, it represents a newly synthesised structure that, whilst inheriting elements from the established lineage of northern Kyushu—such as the use of large, flat-faced stones for the rear wall and the arrangement of stones to partition the entrance to the main chamber (*genshitsu*)—simultaneously incorporated elements characteristic of central Kyushu, including the *dōbari* plan form itself, the use of small split stones, and a corbelled vault ceiling (Kojima 2025). Following the appearance of Hinooka, the construction of stone chambers belonging to the same lineage continued throughout this entire region. In the early sixth century, a new stone chamber structure incorporating elements from other regions was created at the Hinooka Tomb, that is a regional chieftain's grave. Consequently, stone chambers based on the Hinooka chamber as a precursor model were adopted even for small-to-medium-sized tumuli in the area.

The Ōzuka Tomb was likewise a newly created stone chamber structure based on traditional northern Kyushu forms with the addition of elements from central Kyushu and other areas, representing a significant leap from preceding types (Yanagisawa 2004). The main chamber (*genshitsu*) takes a rectangular plan form and is grounded in the native northern Kyushu horizontal-entry (*yokoanashiki*) stone chamber type, featuring a rectangular plan with a double-sided corridor entrance on one of the shorter walls. However, the construction of a large-scale chamber using megaliths reflects influences from southern central Kyushu, while the wide, short corridor (*sendō*) and the sloping ceiling structure are characteristic of the central Kyushu region. Furthermore, the installation of a stone house sarcophagus (*ishiyakata*) made from Aso tuff—a material sourced from central to southern northern

Kyushu—is an element derived from northern-central Kyushu.[9] While the unique architecture of the Ōzuka Tomb makes it difficult to classify strictly within a single uniform lineage, it remains possible to position it as a genealogical prototype; specific features such as the stone shelf (*ishidana*),[10] and the adoption of a multi-chambered structure persisted in the region long after its construction.

Therefore, both Hinooka and Ōzuka—as regional chieftain's tombs—share the common characteristic of having integrated elements from other regions to create new stone chamber structures that differed significantly from preceding forms, afterward serving as ancestral prototypes for subsequent chamber construction.



Figure 5: Ōzuka Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1975).

[9] Ishiyakata (石屋形): Stone House Sarcophagus. A sarcophagus-like facility for depositing remains, with one side of the wall left open; typically installed along the rear wall of a horizontal stone chamber. This form originated in central Kyushu around the turn of the sixth century.

[10] Ishidana (石棚): A slab-like shelf structure built into the mid-section of the rear wall of a horizontal-entry stone chamber, serving also to reinforce the structural integrity of the upper part of the main chamber. Its origins are traced to the Iwase Senzuka burial mound cluster in Wakayama City, Wakayama Prefecture, in the Kansai region

Regarding the depiction of motifs using polychrome pigments, it is certain that this was carried out under the influence of central Kyushu. The depictions of triangular motifs, concentric circles, quivers, and long swords are common to both regions, and the origin of these motifs can be traced back to central Kyushu. In terms of the types of motifs, several new forms emerged in addition to those traditionally adopted as subject matter in central Kyushu. It can be inferred that while the awareness of the original meanings of traditionally depicted motifs faded or shifted, new motifs were created based on the unique funerary conceptions of northern Kyushu.

The expansion of the decorated area likely resulted from the fact that in northern Kyushu, where the use of stone coffins in burial facilities was not originally common, the functional distinction between the coffin and the stone chamber was ambiguous. Furthermore, as the stone coffins and *ishiyakata* that evolved in central Kyushu were essentially 'open coffins' in relation to the exterior, the transition from decoration of coffin or *ishiyakata* interiors to decoration of the chamber interior appears to have been a natural consequence. Therefore, from the aspects of the regional chieftain's graves at Hinooka and Ōzuka, one can trace the process by which a unique decorated tomb culture, distinct from that of central Kyushu, emerged in northern Kyushu during the first half of the sixth century.

Following Hinooka, decorated tombs became established throughout the northern foothills of the Minō mountain range, and numerous stone-chamber type decorated tombs were constructed over a period of approximately 100 years from the first half of the sixth century. For example, in the foothills of Tominaga, Yoshii-machi, Ukiha City, Fukuoka Prefecture—situated near the Hinooka Tomb—four decorated tombs with polychrome motifs stand in a row: the Furuhata, Torifunezuka, Haru, and Mezurashizuka tombs (Figure 6); these are collectively known as the Yakata Tumulus Group.[11] Furthermore, within a range of 10 km to the west and 6 km to the east of the Yakata group, more than 20 decorated tombs are distributed. These decorated tumuli, which share many common elements such as similar stone chamber structures and the symbolic, large-scale depiction of concentric circles, can be positioned as a cohesive group of decorated tombs that became established and evolved within this region.

In addition to the northern foothills of the Minō range, numerous chamber-type decorated tombs were constructed across northern Kyushu. The Kōkadani Tomb,[12] part of the Yame Tumulus Group known as the ancestral burial ground of the Tsukushi-no-kimi clan, has polychrome decoration applied to the internal surfaces of the *ishiyakata* built within the stone chamber. In both the chamber structure and decorative content of Kōkadani, the characteristics of central Kyushu are strongly evident. Consequently, the Noriba Tomb also built within the Yame Tumulus Group, features extensive depictions on the rear wall, both side walls, and the gatepost stones (*sodeishi*) of the stone chamber.[13] The stone chamber structure of Noriba belongs to the lineage established in this region, while its decorative colour tones and placement are closer to those of the decorated tombs in the northern foothills of the Minō range.

[11] Yakata Tumulus Group 屋形古墳群: Comprising four circular tombs each approximately 20 m in diameter. Stone-chamber type decorated tombs. Constructed respectively in: the mid-sixth century (Furuhata Tomb), the second half of the sixth century (Torifunezuka and Haru Tombs), and the first half of the seventh century (Mezurashizuka Tomb).

[12] Kōkadani Tomb 弘化谷古墳: Located in Hirokawa, Hirokawa-machi, Yame-gun, Fukuoka Prefecture. A circular tumulus with a diameter of 39 m, with a horizontal-entrance stone chamber as the principal burial facility. Constructed in the mid-sixth century.

[13] Noriba Tomb 乗場古墳: Located in Yoshida, Yame City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb approximately 70 m in total length, with a multi-chambered horizontal-entrance stone chamber as the principal burial facility. Constructed in the second half of the sixth century.



Figure 6: Mezurashizuka Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1976).

The Haginoo Tomb (Figure 7 A), located in an area adjacent to central Kyushu, shares common stone materials and stone chamber structures with the tumuli distributed across the Kikuchi River basin in central Kyushu.[14] It is therefore considered that the entire funerary system was directly introduced from central Kyushu. The Takehara Tomb (Figure 7 B) was constructed in a region where decorated tombs are not highly concentrated;[15] it is thought that through interaction with surrounding areas, the act of painting decorative murals was introduced sporadically as a single element of funerary ritual.

Furthermore, the entire Munakata region near the northern edge of northern Kyushu is known as the territory of the Munakata-no-kimi (an ancient powerful clan); although numerous tumuli were built there, it is an area where decorated tombs are generally not distributed. Within this context, the Sakurakyō Tomb is an exception,[16] being a decorated tomb featuring both incising and polychrome

[14] Haginoo Tomb 萩ノ尾古墳: Located in Higashihagio-machi, Ōmuta City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A circular tomb with a diameter of 22 m, with a multi-chambered horizontal-entrance stone chamber as the principal burial facility. Constructed at the end of the sixth century to the beginning of the seventh century.

[15] Takehara Tomb 竹原古墳: Located in Takehara, Miyawaka City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A circular tumulus with a diameter of 17–18 m, with a multi-chambered horizontal-entrance stone chamber as the principal burial facility. Constructed in the second half of the sixth century.

[16] Sakurakyō Tomb 桜京古墳: Located in Mutajiri, Munakata City, Fukuoka Prefecture. A keyhole-shaped tomb measuring 39 m in total length, with a multi-chambered horizontal-entrance stone chamber as the principal burial

painting. The chamber structure of this tomb belongs to the local tradition, but strong elements of central Kyushu are evident, notably in the construction of an *ishiyakata* within the chamber and the application of decoration strictly to that structure.

Regarding the evolution of *sōshoku kofun* during this period, three patterns are hypothesised:

1. The traditional inheritance of the act of decoration within a limited region.

2. The introduction of decoration as an element from another region, triggered by the construction of a tomb.

3. The direct introduction of an entire funerary system from another region, ranging from the stone chamber structure to the act of decoration.

Over a period of approximately 100 years, from the first half of the sixth century to the first half of the seventh century, decorated tombs in northern Kyushu evolved along these three trajectories. The stone chamber decorated tombs of northern Kyushu are widely dispersed across various regions and exhibit a rich variety of decorative content; this is the result of new motifs and compositions being created in conjunction with the activation of inter-regional exchange.

facility. An *ishiyakata* was positioned against the rear wall of the inner chamber. Constructed in the mid sixth century.





Figure 7: (A) Haginoo Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum 1975); (B) Takehara Tomb. (Photographed by the Kyushu Historical Museum, 1976).

Changes in the Placement of Decoration

For whom were decorated tombs painted? The purpose and intended audience of the motifs constitute a fundamental question regarding the nature of decorated tombs, attracting particular scholarly attention since the discovery of the Takehara Tomb (Mori 1983; Ishiyama 1995; Kawano 2021).

In the case of stone-coffin type decorated tombs, the coffin was, in principle, produced for a single deceased individual and remained hidden from public view after interment. The circular and *chokkomon* motifs carved on the lids are interpreted as having been intended to exert 'protective and apotropaic power for the deceased or their soul' (Yanagisawa 2022); thus, the decoration strongly addresses the deceased. The stone coffin of the Urayama Tomb features depictions exclusively on its internal surfaces, reflecting a clear intent to provide motifs for the occupant within. The same applies to the stone-barrier chamber of the Nichirinji Tomb. In contrast, despite also being a horizontal-aperture type, the Nishikuma Tomb exhibits a concentration of motifs around the exterior of the aperture, suggesting a layout designed to be seen from the outside during subsequent interments. As Nishikuma dates later than the Sekijinsan or Urayama tombs, its motif arrangement represents a later evolutionary stage.

The Hinooka and Ōzuka tombs, which catalysed the development of decorated tombs in northern Kyushu, both employ decoration covering the entire inner surface of the stone chamber. In terms of significance, this resembles the method practised in central Kyushu of applying comprehensive decoration to the interior of the *ishiyakata*. Yet, upon its introduction to northern Kyushu, the practice departed from its original conventions, evolving instead into a tradition of full-scale wall decoration within the chambers. Factors contributing to this change include the structure of the horizontal stone chamber (which presupposes subsequent interments) and the traditional northern Kyushu burial practice that generally avoided the use of stone coffins.

The painting of motifs across the full chamber surface continued in subsequent periods; there is, however, a tendency for decoration to become concentrated in particular on the rear wall: a single large slab also known in Japanese as 'mirror-stone' (*kagami-ishi*). The introduction and enlargement of the *kagami-ishi* is a common feature of late-period stone chambers in northern Kyushu; keeping pace with this enlargement, there was a trend to treat the wide wall surface as a single canvas upon which motifs were concentrated. By the stage of the Hinooka Tomb, six large concentric circles were already symbolically depicted on a large *kagami-ishi*, and the succeeding Yakata Tumulus Group also concentrated motifs on this specific stone rather than the side walls. The Mezurashizuka Tomb, the final tomb of the Yakata group, features a condensation of various figurative and abstract motifs on a single *kagami-ishi*, a composition that has been interpreted by some as a narrative. Although it is difficult to verify whether these motif groups truly depict a story or if such interpretations are valid, the non-regular arrangement of motifs and their concentration on the *kagami-ishi* certainly prompt viewers to form narrative interpretations.

In the Takehara Tomb, the placement of motifs is restricted to the *kagami-ishi* of the rear wall and the two gatepost stones (*sodeishi*) at the entrance of the inner chamber. The decoration is applied only to those areas that enter the field of vision when looking inward from the antechamber, while walls outside this field of vision remain undecorated. Here, the erstwhile purpose of 'protection and apotropaic power for the soul' became latent, replaced by a layout strongly conscious of how the motifs appeared to the mourners. Although traditional motifs such as *warabitemon* and continuous triangles persist, the depictions include figures and horses with characteristic movement, ceremonial sunshades which are rare in decorated tombs, and the Four Symbols derived from the continent, all based on new funerary conceptions. Through this transition in placement, one can observe a shift in the intended audience of the decorations: from a focus on the deceased to a focus on the mourners.

Conclusion

When examining the social dynamics of the period through the lens of *sōshoku kofun*, the interaction between northern and central Kyushu—and the subsequent expansion of decorated tombs into northern Kyushu founded upon this exchange—can be traced back to the fifth century. However, the development of decorated tombs belonging to the sarcophagus (*sekkan-kei*) and stone-barrier (*sekishō-kei*) lineages remained transient and sporadic within northern Kyushu. During this period, interregional exchange appears to have been relatively static, stable, and superficial. By contrast, stone chamber-type (*sekishitsu-kei*) decorated tomb achieved the creation of new chamber structures and new decorative schemes precisely through the introduction of elements from other regions. The development of this category of *sōshoku kofun* may be understood as the product of fluid and dynamic exchange, both between northern and central Kyushu and within northern Kyushu itself.

A key social event in early sixth-century northern Kyushu was the Iwai Rebellion.[17] Given that both the rebellion and the rise of decorated tombs were characteristic phenomena of this period and region, scholars have long debated the correlation between the two. Using the rebellion as a chronological marker, the subsequent transformation of decorated tombs has historically been interpreted in relation to the rise and fall of stone figures (*sekijin sekiba*)—lithic funerary sculptures placed on the burial mound. The greatest variety and number of *sekijin sekiba* has been recovered from the Iwatoyama Tomb.[18] Previous scholarship suggested that while stone figures declined rapidly after the Iwai Rebellion, stone chamber-type decorated tombs flourished in their stead. This led to the hypothesis that: 'the prohibition of external stone ornamentation, forcibly imposed by the Kinai-based authority in the wake of Iwai's rebellion, led to the internalisation of such expression and thereby promoted the development and elaboration of mural-type (stone chamber-type) *kofun* across Kyushu' (Oda 1966). In recent years, however, this interpretation has been received with considerable scepticism, in part due to the discovery of *sekijin sekiba* postdating the Iwatoyama Tomb. Furthermore, it has been noted that the absence of particularly lavish polychrome murals within the Yame Tumulus Cluster following the rebellion suggests that the influence of the Tsukushi-no-Kimi (the local ruling clan) was no longer formidable by the latter half of the sixth century (Mori 1985). Accordingly, it cannot be stated with certainty that the Tsukushi-no-Kimi lineage led the northward expansion of polychrome murals (Iwanaga 2022).

On the basis of interpretations drawn from written historical sources, it is generally held that the Rebellion of Iwai provided the direct impetus for the establishment of both the *kuni no miyatsuko* system—the system of regional officials that formed the backbone of the Yamato royal authority's governing apparatus—and the *miyake* system of political bases established by the Yamato royal authority across the provinces. The prevailing theory holds that the Yamato court utilised the suppression of the revolt to consolidate its grip on regional governance (Kumagai 2001).

[17] The Rebellion of Iwai: An event in northern Kyushu recorded in written historical sources including the *Kojiki*, the *Nihon Shoki*, and an excerpt from the *Chikugo-no-kuni Fudoki* (cited in *Shoku Nihongi*, vol. 13). In the 21st year of Emperor Keitai's reign (AD 527), Iwai, lord of Tsukushi (northern Kyushu), raised arms to obstruct the advance of the Yamato court forces led by Ōmi no Kena, who had been dispatched to the Korean Peninsula. The Yamato court responded by appointing Mononobe no Arakabi as general and sending troops to Tsukushi. In the 11th month of the 22nd year of Emperor Keitai's reign (AD 528), Iwai's forces clashed with those of the Yamato court in Mii District, Tsukushi, and were defeated. In the 12th month of the same year, Iwai's son Kuzuko presented the Kasuya granary to the Yamato court and was thereby spared from execution.

[18] Iwatoyama Tomb: Located in Yoshida, Yame City, Fukuoka Prefecture. This *zenpōkōenfun* (keyhole-shaped mound) measures approximately 135 m in total length, making it the largest in northern Kyushu. It is widely identified as the tomb of Tsukushi-no-Kimi Iwai.

Whether the construction of the Hinooka Tomb and the Ōzuka Tomb predates or postdates the Rebellion of Iwai remains difficult to determine, particularly since the main burial chamber of the Iwatoyama Tomb remains unexcavated, leaving its internal decorative status unknown. The answer to this question would, however, have significant interpretive consequences: it would determine whether Tsukushi no Kimi Iwai was instrumental in the establishment of the stone chamber-type decorated tomb, or whether the subsequent spread of this tradition across northern Kyushu was entirely unconnected with the Tsukushi clan and its descendants.

What is indisputable is that from the time of the Rebellion of Iwai onwards, *sōshoku kofun* became firmly established in northern Kyushu and continued to be constructed for approximately one hundred years, evolving in form through both interregional exchange and overseas influences. The development of these tombs—the hallmark of northern Kyushu's funerary culture—suggests that the sixth century did not follow the trajectory implied by written historical sources, namely the progressive penetration of an authoritarian system of control accompanied by the erosion of regional culture. Rather, it appears that regional powers and distinct cultural identities were maintained, with central integration proceeding only gradually and at a superficial level.

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CHAPTER 3

ON THE DECORATED TOMBS IN IBARAKI PREFECTURE

KEN'ICHI INADA[1]

Of the approximately 800 decorated tombs identified across Japan, 18 are located in Ibaraki Prefecture. A key distinguishing feature is that while those in Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures are typically tunnel tombs, Ibaraki boasts the mounded tomb style. The most prominent decorated tomb in Ibaraki is the Torazuka Tomb in Hitachinaka City. Dating back to the early seventh century, it is an exceptionally rare example found in an unlooted state. The interior of the stone chamber is vividly adorned with geometric patterns, weapons, and armour, painted using red ochre and white clay. Furthermore, it serves as a world-class success story in heritage management, having balanced preservation with public viewing under strict temperature and humidity controls for over 45 years. Strong parallels can be observed between the decorated tombs of Ibaraki and those in Kyushu, over 1,000 km away. Notable similarities include the combined use of incised lines and pigments, nearly identical motifs such as concentric circles, and the excavation of black-lacquered cups—a characteristic feature of Kyushu settlements. The strategy of the Yamato Sovereignty is presumed to be the background of this connection. It is theorised that seafaring groups from Kyushu, under the direct control of the central government, migrated to and settled in coastal Ibaraki as a 'vanguard' for the conquest of the Tohoku region. Since Ibaraki sits at the convergence of the Kuroshio and Oyashio currents, it likely served as a strategic hub linking maritime and inland water transport, making it the ideal base for northward expansion.

Keywords: *Ibaraki Prefecture, Decorated Tombs, Torazuka Tomb, Heritage Management, Maritime Expansion, Yamato Sovereignty*

茨城県の装飾古墳

稲田健一（ひたちなか市埋蔵文化財調査センター）

全国で約 800 基ほどしか確認されていない装飾古墳のうち、茨城県には 18 基が存在する。最大の特徴は、福島県や宮城県が「横穴墓」であるのに対し、茨城県には「高塚古墳」の形態が存在する点である。茨城県を代表する装飾古墳は，ひたちなか市にある虎塚古墳である。7 世紀初頭の虎塚古墳は、未盗掘の状態で発見された極めて珍しい例である。石室内にはベンガラと白土で、幾何学文様や武器・武具が鮮やかに描かれている。また、45 年以上にわたり、厳格な温湿度管理のもとで保存と一般公開を両立させている世界的な成功例でもある。茨城県の装飾古墳には、1,000km 以上離れた九州（特に熊本県）との強い共通点が見られる。例としては，線刻と彩色を併用する技法や、同心円などのモチーフが酷似していること，九州の集落と同じ特徴を持つ「黒漆塗りの杯」が出土していることなどがあげられる。このつながりの背景には、ヤマト政権の戦略があったと推測した。政権の直轄下に入った航海術に長けた九州の集団が、東北征服の「先鋒」として茨城沿岸部に移住・定住したと考える。茨城県（特にひた

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ちなか周辺）は黒潮と親潮の海流の結節点であり、海上交通と内陸水運をつなぐ交通の要衝であったため、東北進出の拠点として選ばれたのではないかと考える。
キーワード：茨城県における装飾古墳の希少性と特徴、虎塚古墳の重要性、茨城県と九州地方との強いつながり、ヤマト政権による東北進出の拠点、保存と公開の成功例

There are two major important aspects of decorated tombs in Japan. First, while some 150,000 or more tombs were built during the Kofun period from the middle third to seventh centuries, only 800 or so decorated tombs are known (cf. Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025). Second, the spatial distributions of the decorated tombs are skewed toward Kyushu and northeastern mainland Japan, including Ibaraki, Fukushima and Miyagi Prefectures. It is highly noteworthy that these two regions are very far away from the Nara-Osaka areas where the central polity was presumably located during the Kofun period.

In eastern Japan, there are 18 decorated tombs in Hitachi (Ibaraki Prefecture), 54 in Fukushima Prefecture, and 34 in Miyagi Prefecture, totalling 106. Those in Hitachi are distinguished from those in Fukushima and Miyagi because, while the former are all mounded tombs, the latter are all tunnel tombs. The tunnel tombs were characterised by structures in which a burial chamber was constructed in a tunnel dug into a cliff.

Overview of Decorated Tombs in Ibaraki Prefecture

Natural Environment

The topography of Ibaraki Prefecture is divided into three distinct areas: the mountainous region in the north, the uplands in the central and western regions, and the lowlands surrounding Lake Kasumigaura in the southeast, with the Pacific Ocean extending to the east. Due to this varied geography, the *Hitachi no kuni fudoki* (Ancient Records of the Culture and Geography of Hitachi Province) described the region as *Tokoyo-no-kuni* (an eternal land) blessed with the bounties of both the mountains and the sea—a rich natural environment that persists to this day. The major rivers include the Tone, Kinu, Sakura, Naka, and Kuji Rivers. Furthermore, Lake Kasumigaura, the second-largest lake in Japan, is located in the southern part of the prefecture; during the Kofun period, it was a vast 'inner sea' (inland sea) boasting an expansive water area.

Conditions in the Late Kofun Period

According to the *Hitachi no kuni fudoki*, the region of present-day Ibaraki Prefecture during the Late Kofun period consisted of six provinces—Niihari, Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Naka, Kuji, and Taka—each ruled by a *kuni no miyatsuko* (provincial governor). The western edge of modern-day Ibaraki was part of Shimosa Province in ancient times, and no decorated tombs have been identified in that specific area. Based on research to date, the chronological status of tombs within the prefecture is as follows:

1. **Mid-sixth century:** Introduction of horizontal stone chambers (*yokoanashiki sekishitsu*).
2. **Late sixth century:** Cessation of the placement of *haniwa* (terracotta funerary objects).
3. **Early seventh century:** Cessation of the construction of large keyhole-shaped mounds (*zenpōkōenfun*).
4. **Late sixth century:** Introduction of tunnel tombs (*yokoana-bo*).

Number and Distribution

Currently, 18 decorated funerary structures have been identified in Ibaraki Prefecture (Figure 1): nine burial mounds (*kofun*) and nine tunnel tombs (*yokoana-bo*). As this total includes sites that may contain later additions or graffiti, there are 11 'confirmed' decorated sites: eight featuring polychrome paintings and three featuring only linear incisions. The distribution spans several municipalities: Kasumigaura (2), Chikusei (1), Sakuragawa (1), Mito (3), Hitachinaka (2), Naka (1), Tōkai Village (2), Hitachiota (3), and Hitachi (3). Rather than being concentrated in a single area, they are scattered across the prefecture. This distribution pattern appears to correspond with the ancient provinces mentioned previously.

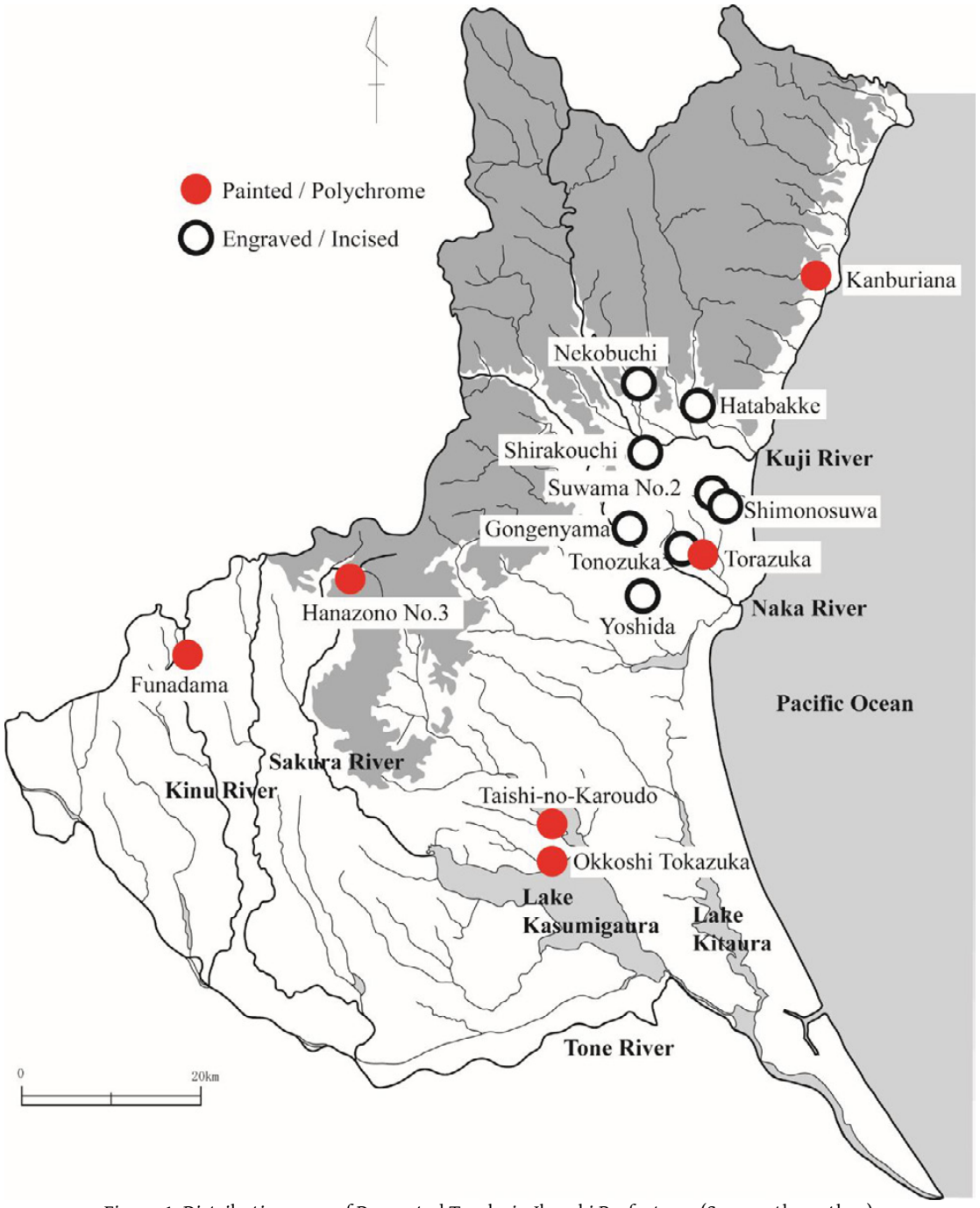

Figure 1: Distribution map of Decorated Tombs in Ibaraki Prefecture. (Source: the author).

Characteristics of Decorated Tombs in Ibaraki Prefecture

Morphology of the Mounds

Among the nine burial mounds, the shapes consist of two keyhole-shaped mounds, three round mounds, two square mounds, one polygonal mound, and one of unknown shape. Notably, while decorated sites in Fukushima and Miyagi Prefectures consist entirely of tunnel tombs (*yokoana-bo*), Ibaraki is the only prefecture in Eastern Japan where decorated sites with polychrome paintings take the form of high-mound tumuli (*takatsuka*).

Characteristics within Mound and Cave Groups

Decorated tombs in Ibaraki rarely exist in isolation; they typically form groups with other mounds or tunnel tombs. For example, the Torazuka Kofun is part of a cluster consisting of one keyhole-shaped mound, two square mounds, and two of unknown shape. Within such groups, the decorated tombs often serve as the 'principal mound' (Nabatame 2002: 65). Regarding tunnel tombs, in the Kanburiana group, Caves No. 2, 11, and 14 (the decorated ones) feature larger burial chambers and unique internal structures compared to the others, suggesting they were also the principal tombs of the group.

Commonalities in Horizontal Stone Chambers

The burial facility of the Torazuka Kofun is a horizontal stone chamber constructed by assembling slab-shaped pieces of processed tuff. The side walls follow a specific structure: two slabs on the left and one on the right. This '2-to-1' side-wall configuration is found in only four cases in the prefecture (Okkoshi Tokazuka, Funadama, Omitama City Iwaya, and Torazuka), three of which are decorated tombs. This suggests a potential connection between the deceased individuals or the craftsmen who constructed the chambers (Nabatame 2002: 67). Other structural similarities can be seen in the incised Yoshida and Shirakouchi Kofun, where three slabs of processed tuffaceous mudstone are lined up on each side, with the corners where the walls meet the ceiling being chamfered.

Colours and Motifs

The colour schemes in Ibaraki vary: three sites use red only, two use red and white, one uses red and black, and two use a three-colour palette of red, black, and white. The motifs in Torazuka Kofun consist of geometric patterns (circles and triangles) and figurative depictions of weapons and armour (shields, swords, quivers, and bracers). A defining characteristic of motifs in this prefecture is this focus on weaponry, particularly the quiver (*yuki*), which appears in both painted and incised forms. While geometric patterns are common, a notable difference from Fukushima Prefecture is the absence of human figures. Technique-wise, Torazuka Kofun utilises a combination of painting and incision. This specific technique is also found in the Kanburiana tunnel tombs (Hitachi City) and the Nakada tunnel tomb (Iwaki City, Fukushima), suggesting it is a regional characteristic of decorated tombs along the Pacific coast from Hitachinaka to Iwaki. In particular, the Nakada tunnel tomb shares many similarities with Torazuka, including the continuous triangle motifs and the use of white and red pigments, implying maritime interaction based on the sites' coastal locations.

Construction Period

The oldest decorated *kofun* in Ibaraki is believed to be the Taishi-no-Karoudo Kofun, dating to the late sixth century. Construction continued into the seventh century with sites like Torazuka and Okkoshi Tokazuka, lasting until the mid-seventh century. Torazuka and Okkoshi Tokazuka are considered the

final keyhole-shaped mounds in their respective regions; following this period, the construction shifted toward round and square mounds rather than keyhole shapes.

Public Access

In Ibaraki Prefecture, the only decorated burial mound with a public facility that is regularly open to the public is the Torazuka Tomb. Many other burial mounds are not open to the public due to management issues or the condition of their murals. The inability to view the murals is a problem not only in Ibaraki Prefecture but also in Kyushu, and the inability to view the murals is a hindrance to the study of decorated tombs.

About the Torazuka Mounded Tomb

The Torazuka Mounded Tomb (Figure 2) is located 120 km northeast of Tokyo. It is situated on a height in the tributary area of the Naka River that flows into the Pacific Ocean. The mounded tomb is 4 km away from the Pacific coast. The mounded tomb is keyhole-shaped.

The first excavation at Torazuka took place in 1973. The excavation yielded a result that the mounded tomb was 57 m in length and 7 m in height. It was built in the early seventh century (cf. Ōtsuka 1978). That excavation also resulted in the discovery of a corridor-style horizontal burial chamber in the circular, rear portion of the mound. The entrance to the burial chamber was sealed by a pile of large stones.

Investigations by Katsuta City (now Hitachinaka City) and Meiji University in 1973 found that the burial chamber was undisturbed. Accordingly, we commissioned the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties to investigate the environment inside the burial chamber prior to opening it up. Such an investigation was unprecedented in the history of Japanese archaeology. At this point of time, we did not foresee that the burial chamber was decorated. The investigation of the environment inside the burial chamber yielded the results that the concentration of carbon dioxide was 50 times more than the ordinary natural environment, the temperature was 15 degrees centigrade as opposed to 32 degrees outside at the time of excavation, and the humidity was 92 per cent as opposed to 65 per cent outside. These data are very important and useful for the preservation of the burial chamber environment today.

After the environmental data was obtained, the burial chamber was opened. The entrance to the main chamber was sealed by a large stone slab of 1.2 m in height, 0.9 to 1.2 m in width, and 20 cm in thickness. Once the stone slab was removed, mural paintings were discovered inside. The condition of the mural walls was excellent because the burial chamber had been sealed since the early seventh century. This was the first discovery of a decorated tomb in a previously undisturbed condition in the history of Japanese archaeology. The paintings were on the back wall, side walls, and behind the entrance.

The paintings consist of geometric patterns and pictorial motifs of armour and weapons. On the back wall, there are two concentric circle patterns and a series of triangle patterns above the two concentric circles. Below the two concentric circles are, from the left, fifteen spears, quivers, an archer's left-wrist protector, and three swords. The identification of the quivers, the archer's left-wrist protector, and swords is based on *haniwa* ceramic figurines produced in the sixth century in Japan.

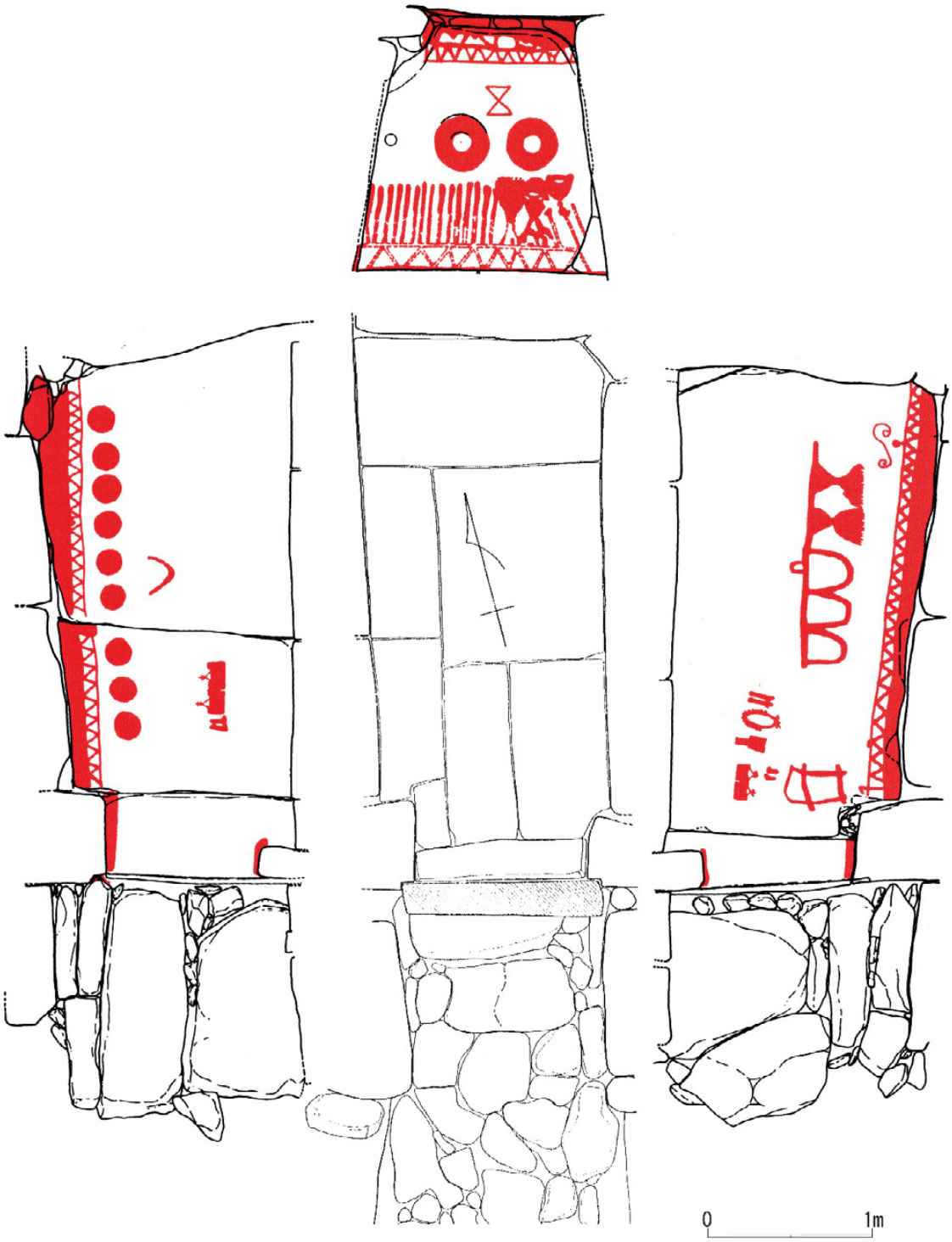

Figure 2: Stone chamber and murals of the Torazuka Tomb. (Ōtsuka 1978)

On the left wall, there are a series of triangle patterns at the top, nine circles and a U-shaped object below the triangles, as well as what we interpret as horse gear further below. On the right wall were found a series of triangle patterns at the top, a small circle hanging down from the pattern, two quivers and three shields on a straight line in the centre, what may be interpreted as a necklace and horse gear at the lower right, as well as other pictorial representations. Note that the ceiling is painted red. For the mural wall, white plaster and red ochre or *bengala* were used. The white plaster is derived from the same tuff as the stone materials used in the stone chamber. Traces of application using a spatula-like tool about 5 cm wide can be seen on the walls. Chemical analyses of the red pigment indicate that it was derived from bog iron (biogenic ferric oxide) readily available in the vicinity of Torazuka. Traces of the compass axes used to draw the two concentric circles on the back wall were also discovered. The use of a compass allowed the Torazuka artist(s) to draw true circles. The area within the concentric circles was painted red.

The adoption of both line drawing and colour paintings was a technique very close to that adopted in Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu where the majority of decorated tombs in Japan are known. The adoption of both line drawing and colour paintings found in 35 tombs in Kumamoto Prefecture, five in Fukuoka Prefecture, and one in Oita Prefecture is particularly characteristic of decorated tombs in the Kikuchi River basin, such as the Eianji-Higashi Tomb and Tsukabōzu Tomb in Tamana City, Kumamoto, and the patterns themselves are also similar (Nabatame 2002: 67-68). It is highly noteworthy that the same techniques and similar motifs were adopted to decorated tombs in Ibaraki Prefecture and Kyushu, more than 1000 km away from each other. The material cultures, such as pictorial motifs, and techniques for decorating burial facilities, appeared in eastern Japan, without any precedents, toward the end of the sixth century. Importantly, these material cultures are closely related to Kyushu. Black lacquer bowls have been excavated from Torazuka as well as at settlement sites in Hitachinaka City. This characteristic type of bowl has also been excavated at settlement sites in Kumamoto Prefecture, and their similarity is very noteworthy.

The relationship between Ibaraki Prefecture and Kyushu

How can we understand the background to these similarities between Ibaraki and Kyushu? One aspect, I argue, would be the intention of the central polity of Yamato to advance into northeastern Honshu. Toward the end of the 520s, King Keitai quelled the rebellion of Iwai, the Provincial Governor of Tsukushi (present western Fukuoka Prefecture). While many regional elites far away from the central polity region remained relatively autonomous, King Keitai's successful military campaign allowed him to place many regions in northern Kyushu under the direct control of the central polity. Local elites in northern Kyushu under the direction of the central polity advanced into Ibaraki and the surrounding areas to impart their superior navigational skills. This move may have also aimed to relocate the group from northern Kyushu to a distant location, thus avoiding the risk of rebellion. Furthermore, their excellent navigation skills can be inferred from their travel to and from the Korean Peninsula via the Genkai Sea. The Kyushu elites and their people were first based in Ibaraki, and then advanced to northeastern Honshu. I hypothesise that elites and peoples from northern Kyushu who were settled in the eastern peripheral region of the sphere of Yamato influence played a major role as a 'vanguard' to conquer northeastern Honshu. My hypothesis is backed by the historical phenomenon that local soldiers of Ibaraki and its southern and southwestern neighbouring regions were stationed in northern Kyushu to defend Japan against the potential threat of Tang China from the 650s.

Why, then, was the area of modern Ibaraki Prefecture chosen to be the base for advancing into northeastern Honshu? The major reason was geographical. The Kuroshio current flowing from the southwestern Pacific to the Pacific coastal regions of Japan meets the Oyashio current flowing from the

coastal region of the Russian Far East. These two currents meet off the coast of Cape Chōshi, just south of Ibaraki Prefecture. This place where the two currents meet has long been difficult and dangerous for sailors to navigate. Even during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), commodities and goods from northern Japan were offloaded in the Hitachinaka area and trans-shipped to boats on rivers and lakes in Ibaraki and its southwestern neighbouring regions. In other words, the areas surrounding Torazuka and Jūgorō-ana functioned as a traffic hub connecting maritime traffic and inland waterway transportation. Although this is a Tokugawa period phenomenon, my traffic hub hypothesis gains support from the discoveries of numerous non-local artefacts of the Kofun period in the Hitachinaka area.

Another line of archaeological evidence to support my traffic hub hypothesis is a group of mounded tombs and cist graves on the Pacific coast in Hitachinaka. There, more than 100 graves are distributed within a range of some three kilometres. These mounded tombs and cist graves are dated from the fifth to seventh centuries. Rocks for the cist graves were all collected on the local Pacific coast. The discovered artefacts, such as bone and antler arrowheads are closely associated with tombs on the coast. Therefore, I suspect that these mounded tombs and cist graves were the burials of people who were involved in maritime traffic and/or fisheries (Inada 2019).

In summary, in Hitachinaka there have been mounded tombs and cist graves since the fifth century as well as a decorated tomb and tunnel tombs of the seventh century. Hitachinaka during the Kofun period was a traffic hub where people and goods from various regions came together. At the beginning of seventh century, a group from Northern Kyushu with outstanding navigation skills was dispatched to this region. However, since they would not have been familiar with Ibaraki's specific ocean currents or ports of call, it is likely that they merged with local coastal groups who possessed that knowledge. Since the local people leaned navigational skills from the northern Kyushu immigrants, Hitachinaka became the base for the Yamato state's advance into northeastern Honshu. Furthermore, sea routes were superior for transporting large numbers of soldiers and supplies, and the distribution of decorated *kofun* along the coastline is thought to be related to this fact. In fact, historic sources [*Shoku-Nihongi*] written in the eighth century mention that soldiers from northern Ibaraki played a major role in conquering the native people of northeastern Honshu. This theory is further supported by the high frequency of weapons and armour depicted in the motifs of decorated tombs throughout Ibaraki. In this way, our research into decorated tombs in Ibaraki and its neighbouring regions makes an important contribution to understanding the history of Japan in the seventh century.

Finally, I would like to mention some issues regarding the protection, preservation, and opening to the public of the Torazuka tomb. Since 1980, the burial chamber has been opened to the public for eight days in spring and eight days in autumn every year for the past 45 years. The reason for the spring and autumn schedule is that the temperature difference between the outside air and the inside of the stone chamber is reduced during those seasons. The success of this public display stems from the environmental survey conducted prior to the excavation. As mentioned earlier, before opening the door to the stone chamber of the Torazuka tomb, an analysis of the air, temperature and humidity inside the chamber was carried out, and the data obtained from this analysis are an important reason why it has been preserved and made accessible to the public to this day. In addition, inspections of the stone chamber are conducted before and after public viewing, and strict measures are taken to minimise the amount of time people spend inside the chamber.

For the preservation and protection of the Torazuka burial chamber, several measures have been taken over the past fifty years. For example, the temperature and humidity of the inside of the burial chamber have been recorded every 24 hours since 1973. Collecting environmental data from the inside of a burial

chamber over such a long period is probably very unusual anywhere in the world. The Torazuka data are useful for the protection of decorated tombs in other regions of Japan. These preservation protocols still continue and Torazuka is acclaimed among Japanese archaeologists as a very rare example of the successful preservation of a decorated tomb, as well as for its importance as a representative example of decorated tombs in Ibaraki Prefecture.

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CHAPTER 4

THE FACES OF PREHISTORIC TOKYO: 3D ANALYSIS OF ENGRAVED HUMAN FIGURES FROM THE FUDŌBASHI TUNNEL TOMB

JAMES FRANCES LOFTUS[1]

Engraved imagery in Japan's Kofun-period tunnel tombs remains understudied due to the documentation challenges of shallow incisions. This study utilises ultra-high-resolution structured-light 3D scanning to analyse a rare, detached slab from Tomb 11 of the Fudōbashi group (Tokyo), featuring two anthropomorphic figures. The resulting sub-millimetre 3D model reveals deliberate wall preparation, evidenced by a regularised upper surface contrasting with tool-marked lower zones. Quantitative analysis of geodesic length and proxy depth identifies distinct carving strategies between the two figures. The upper figure features short, deep, controlled incisions, while the lower figure is characterised by broader, diffuse marks and punctate elements. Furthermore, the lower wall preserves a cluster of shallow, irregular incisions distinct from the primary imagery. Their low height and lack of control suggest a separate interaction phase, potentially by a different, smaller individual. These findings demonstrate that the Fudōbashi slab records multiple phases of surface interaction rather than a single carving event. Ultimately, this research highlights how high-resolution 3D documentation can recover nuanced production sequences in low-relief archaeological contexts that conventional methods frequently overlook.

Keywords: *Fudōbashi Tunnel Tomb, Anthropomorphic Engravings, 3D Surface Analysis, Carving Technique, Tool Mark Analysis*

先史時代東京の「顔」：不動橋横穴墓群における人物線刻の三次元解析

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古墳時代の横穴墓にみられる線刻画は、刻線が極めて浅く、従来の記録手法では詳細な把握が困難であったため、十分な研究が蓄積されてこなかった。本研究では、東京都世田谷区・不動橋横穴墓群第 11 号墓から出土した 2 体の人物線刻を有する剥ぎ取り資料を対象に、高精細な構造化光方式 3D スキャニングを用いた分析を行った。サブミリメートル精度の 3D モデルによる解析の結果、線刻の施行に先立ち、壁面上部を平滑に整える意図的な調整工程が存在したことが明らかとなった。幾何学的解析（測地線長および深さ指標の比較）の結果、2 体の人物像には明確な製作技法の差異が認められた。上方の像は短く深い制御された刻線で構成されるのに対し、下方の像は幅広で拡散的な刻線と点状の打刻を伴う。さらに、壁面下部には主要な図像とは異なる浅く不規則な刻痕群が確認された。これらは分布が低位置に限定され、習熟度が低いことから、主要図像の製作とは異なる段階において、より身体の小さな個体などが関与した可能性を示唆している。本研究の結果は、不動橋横穴墓の線刻が単一の製作イベントではなく、複数段階にわたる壁面への介入の集積であることを示している。また、高精細 3D 解析が、従来の調査では見落とされがちであった低レリーフな遺構における製作工程や行為の連鎖（chaines opératoires）を復元する上で極めて有効であることを実証した。

キーワード：不動橋横穴墓群、人物線刻、三次元計測、刻線技術、工具痕分析

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Introduction

Shallow incised markings represent a difficult form of archaeological surface modification to document and analyse. As a result, visibility is highly dependent on lighting conditions, and morphology is frequently obscured by surface weathering, erosion, and post-depositional alteration. These challenges are particularly evident in the case of engraved burial chamber walls from the Late Kofun period (ca. sixth–seventh centuries AD), where motifs can be typically rendered as low-relief incisions directly into soft geological substrates.

In the Japanese archipelago, such engraved imagery is most commonly associated with tunnel tombs (*yokoanabo* 横穴墓), which formed one of the principal forms of horizontal burial facilities during the later Kofun period (Haniuda 1992). In contrast to the well-known painted burial chambers of western Japan, which have received extensive scholarly attention, engraved tomb imagery in eastern Japan remains comparatively understudied. This imbalance reflects not only differences in preservation, but also the methodological difficulty of recording and statically analysing shallow incisions using conventional archaeological techniques. As a result, many engraved motifs, especially those rendered in relative low relief, remain only partially documented in existing excavation reports.

A particularly distinctive example of such imagery is found in the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb group (Fudōbashi *yokoanagun* 不動橋横穴群) in present-day Setagaya Ward, Tokyo. Excavations conducted between 1998 and 1999 revealed a cluster of thirteen seventh-century tunnel tombs, among which 'Tomb 11' contained a series of line engravings carved into the rear wall of the burial chamber (Figure 1) (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). Although portions of the surface had been lost due to root activity and possible later disturbance, several motifs remained visible, including two anthropomorphic figures rendered in broad, shallow incisions.

These figures depict stylised human forms with simplified facial features and rectangular torsos; one appears to hold a 'sword-like' object, while the other carries a staff and may be depicted with a crying expression (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). As one of the few known examples of anthropomorphic engraving in a tunnel tomb in the Tokyo region, the Fudōbashi carvings represent an important case for understanding regional variability in Late Kofun visual expression (Kashiwagi 2005).

Following excavation, the decorated portion of the chamber wall was removed as a single slab and preserved prior to the destruction of the tomb during residential development. While this intervention ensured the survival of the engraved surface, it also detached the imagery from its original context. The carvings were documented at the time of excavation through photographs and line drawings; however, the shallow nature of the incisions and the irregularity of the surface make detailed analysis difficult using such two-dimensional methods alone.

This study presents the first high-resolution three-dimensional documentation of the engraved slab from Fudōbashi Tomb 11 using an Artec Spider II blue-light structured-light scanner. The resulting digital models enable detailed analysis of incision morphology, surface preparation, and carving technique, while also allowing the application of enhanced visualization methods that improve the visibility of shallow engravings. In addition, the creation of a digital model provides a permanent record of the carvings, preserving their surface geometry for future research.

The objectives of this chapter are threefold. First, it presents high-resolution 3D documentation of the anthropomorphic engravings from the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb. Second, it examines the morphology and carving techniques of the figures based on the digital surface data. Finally, it evaluates the broader

potential of digital recording methods for documenting and preserving low-relief engraved imagery in archaeological contexts where preservation and visibility present significant challenges.

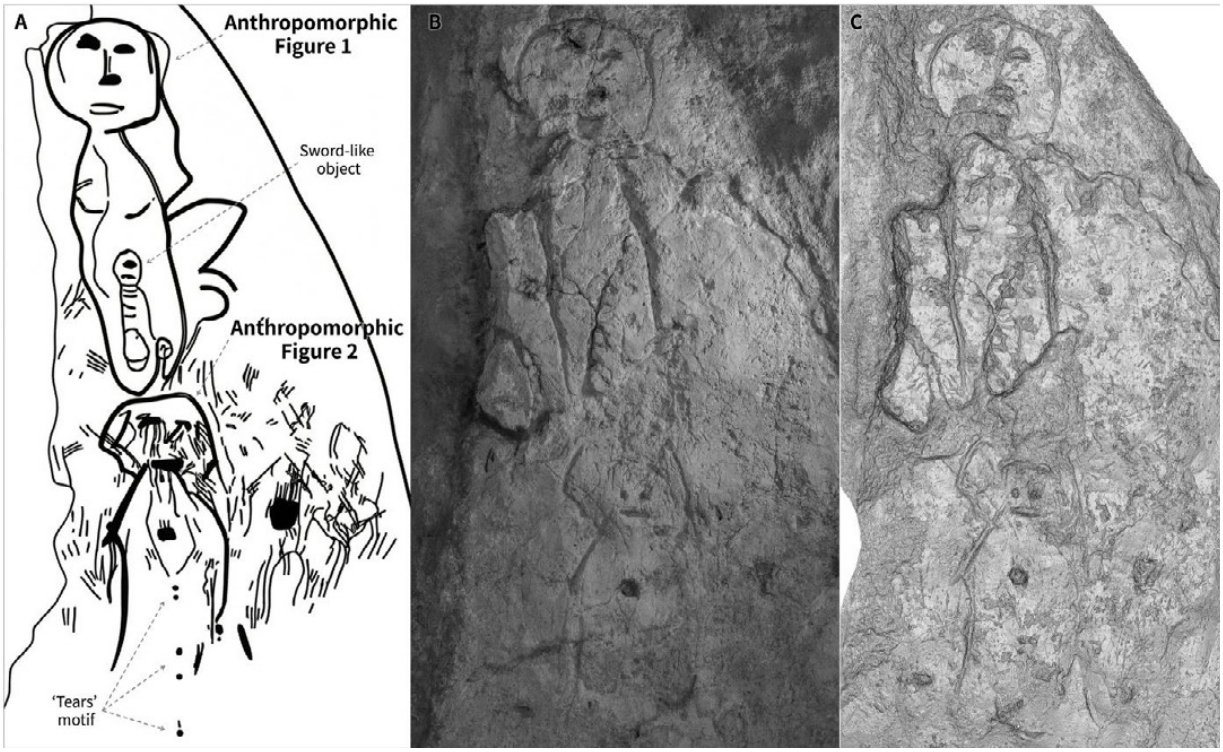

Figure 1: Anthropomorphic engravings on the rear wall of Fudōbashi Tomb 11. (A) Line drawing of the carved figures, indicating key features (Modified from Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). (B) Photograph of the engraved slab (author). (C) High-resolution 3D model showing enhanced visibility of incision morphology.

Archaeological Context of the Fudōbashi Tunnel Tomb

Tunnel Tombs in the Musashi Region

Tunnel tombs formed part of the wider complex of horizontal burial facilities that became widespread across the archipelago during the sixth and seventh centuries AD (Haniuda 1992). These tombs generally consist of a short entrance corridor (*sendō* 羨道) leading to a chamber (*genshitsu* 玄室), and their proliferation reflects a broader shift toward more localized and collective mortuary practices during the final phase of the Kofun period (Haniuda 1992; Hasegawa 2005). By the sixth and seventh centuries AD, horizontal burial facilities had become the dominant mortuary form (Haniuda 1992).

Across the Musashino Plateau (Musashino Daichi, 武蔵野台地) (Figure 2), the distribution of tunnel tombs is closely tied to geomorphological conditions. The plateau is composed primarily of relatively soft Kanto loam (Kantō rōmu 関東ローム) deposits, which are well suited to excavation using hand tools. As a result, tunnel tombs are typically concentrated along the dissected edges of the plateau, where river systems such as the Tama River and its tributaries, including the Nogawa and Sen rivers, have created steep terrace scarps and incised valleys. These slope environments provide both the

physical conditions necessary for tunnel tomb excavation and elevated positions overlooking adjacent lowlands, making them ideal locations for burial.

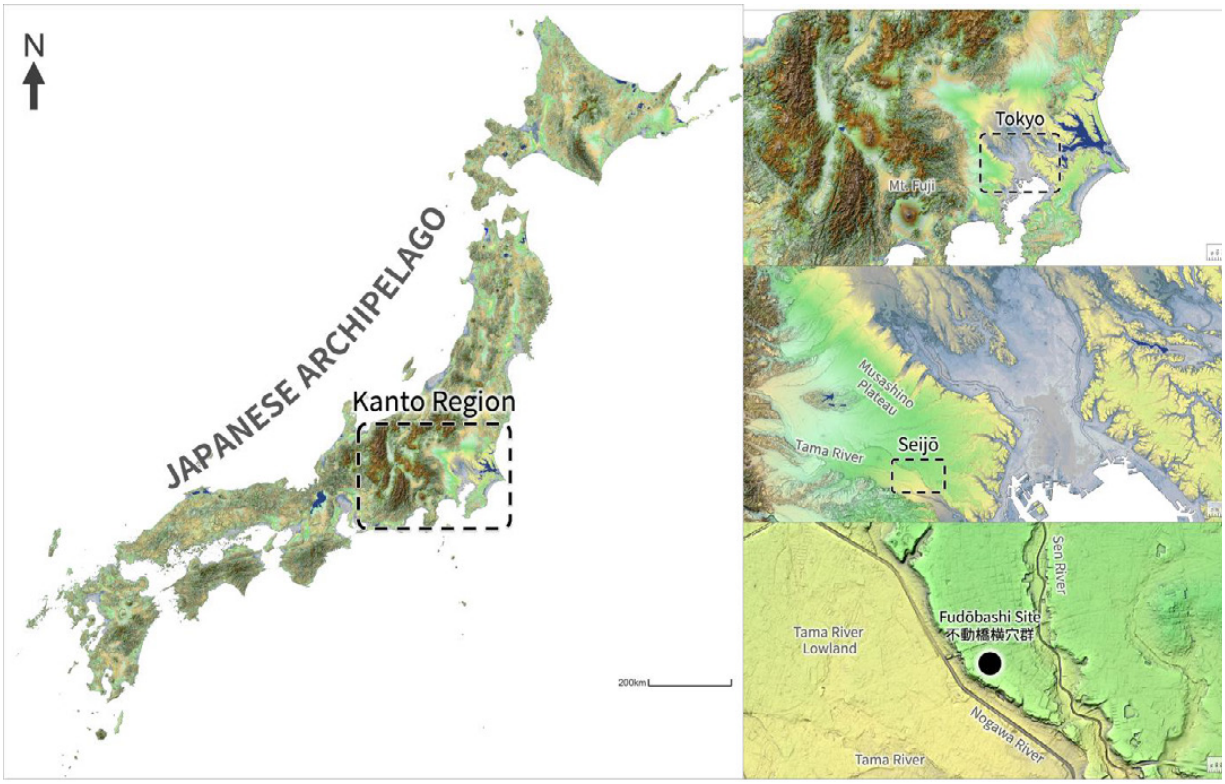

Figure 2: Location of the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb group (Setagaya Ward, Tokyo). With progressive zoom from the Japanese archipelago to the Kantō region, Tokyo, and the Seijō area. Map created utilizing the 'KASHMIR 3D' program, utilizing public domain, open access base data from the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan (GSI).

Within present-day Tokyo, tunnel tombs are documented at a number of sites along the southern margins of the Musashino Plateau, particularly in the lower Tama River region. Examples include the Araisato (Araisato Yokoanagun, 新居里横穴墓群), Araijuku (Araijuku Yokoanagun, 新井宿横穴墓群), Unoki 1-chōme (Unoki Icchome Yokoanagun, 鵜の木一丁目横穴墓群), and Sannō 1-chōme (Sanno Icchome Yokoanagun, 山王一丁目横穴墓群) tunnel tomb groups in present-day Ōta Ward. These sites demonstrate that tunnel tomb construction was not isolated but formed part of a broader pattern of burial activity distributed along plateau edges and terrace systems in southern Musashi. In most cases, these tombs are undecorated and are characterised primarily by their architectural features rather than any form of wall imagery.

The construction of tunnel tombs involved the excavation of chambers directly into the loam substrate using iron or wooden tools such as picks or chisels. Evidence of this process is preserved in the form of tool marks (*kōguhen* 工具痕) visible on chamber walls and ceilings (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). Ceilings often exhibit radiating or split-tool patterns, while side walls show vertically oriented or slightly curved incision marks produced during excavation. Tunnel tombs are defined by a side opening

connecting the chamber to the exterior, a feature that made reopening and additional interment structurally possible (Haniuda 1992). While neighbouring regions such as Kanagawa Prefecture have produced a number of tunnel tombs with line-engraved motifs, only a small number of examples exist within Tokyo itself, with only two being recorded in excavation reports or bulletins by archaeologists (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999; Kashiwagi 2005). The presence of line-engraved anthropomorphic imagery within Tomb 11 distinguishes Fudōbashi as an exceptional example within the Tokyo corpus, providing rare evidence for the use of incised visual expression in a region where such practices are otherwise uncommon.

Excavation of the Fudōbashi Tunnel Tomb Group

The Fudōbashi tunnel tomb group is located in Seijō, Setagaya Ward, in southwestern Tokyo, situated along the dissected margins of the Musashino Plateau. More precisely, the site occupies a ridge-like landform between the Sen and Nogawa Rivers, within a zone where the plateau surface begins to break into a series of valleys. This elevated position lies just above the transition to the Tama River alluvial lowlands (Tamagawa Teichi, 多摩川低地), which extend to the south. The site was discovered during construction planning for a private residential development, prompting a rescue excavation conducted between November 1998 and February 1999. The investigation covered an area of approximately 113.26 m^2 and formed part of a series of excavations at the site, with this campaign representing the third phase of investigation (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999).

The excavation revealed thirteen tunnel tombs belonging to the broader Fudōbashi tomb cluster (Figure 3). These tombs were cut into the upper layers of the Musashino loam deposits and generally follow a consistent architectural pattern. Most chambers exhibit a fan-shaped or bottle-like form, while the ceilings are typically arched. Some tombs contain prepared coffin platforms within the burial chamber, while others lack such features. Several tombs also show evidence of secondary modification or reuse, suggesting that the burial spaces were reopened and altered during subsequent interments.

The tomb entrances were originally sealed using pebble closures, although variations in closure techniques were observed. In some cases, a combination of cut stone blocks and pebble fills was used during later phases of burial activity. A flat Sue ware flask recovered from the forecourt of Tomb 7 is particularly important for dating the tomb group, as it suggests a chronological placement in the third quarter of the seventh century (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). Based on these finds and associated stratigraphic evidence, the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb cluster is generally dated to the seventh century, spanning approximately the early to late decades of that century. Among the thirteen tombs documented during the excavation, Tomb 11 proved particularly noteworthy due to the presence of line-engraved imagery carved into the rear wall of the burial chamber. These carvings represent one of the few examples of decorated tunnel tomb imagery recorded within Tokyo and thus constitute the most distinctive feature of the Fudōbashi site.

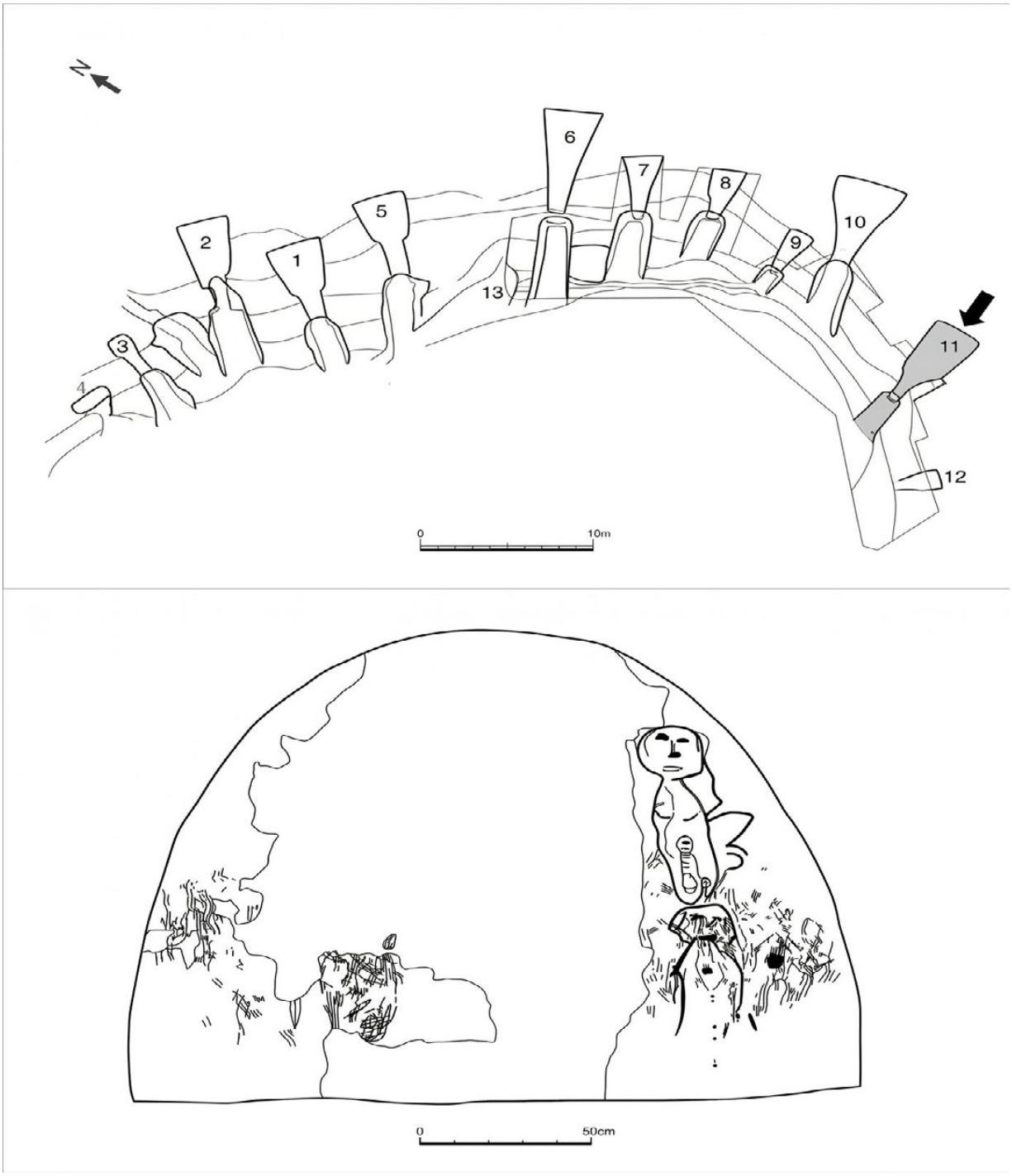

Figure 3: Top: plan of the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb group showing Tombs 1–13 (Tomb 11 indicated by arrow). Bottom: composite line drawing of the rear wall of Tomb 11 showing the anthropomorphic figures and surrounding incisions. (Modified from Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999).

Tomb 11

Tomb 11 is located toward the eastern portion of the excavated tomb cluster and was constructed at an elevation of approximately 35.5 m within the lower portion of the Musashino loam layer. The tomb has a total length of approximately 5.97 m and is oriented along an axis of roughly N–92°–E. The burial chamber exhibits a bottle-shaped plan and an arched ceiling, a form typical of many tunnel tombs of the period. The chamber itself measures approximately 3.12 m in length, with a rear wall width of 2.08 m and a maximum interior height of 1.64 m. The entrance passage leading to the chamber measures roughly 1.30 m in length and varies between 0.46 and 0.73 m in width (Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999).

Within the chamber, the floor was covered with a layer of river stones forming a pebble pavement. Near the rear of the chamber, a raised platform interpreted as a coffin base was identified approximately 1.46 m from the rear wall. This platform consisted of a double-layered pebble construction, with smaller stones forming the base layer and larger stones placed above them. Tool marks from the excavation of the chamber remain visible on portions of the ceiling and side walls, indicating the methods used to carve the tomb from the surrounding loam. Notably, the upper half of the rear wall appears to have been intentionally smoothed, likely to create a suitable surface for the engraved imagery that was later carved into this area.

Description of the Carved Figures & Challenges of Documenting Shallow Incisions

The engraved imagery within Tomb 11 is located on the rear wall of the burial chamber. Although a large portion of the central wall surface had been lost due to damage caused by tree roots, several engraved motifs remained visible along the right side, lower central portion, and left side of the wall. The surviving imagery includes a variety of incised forms, some of which resemble geometric patterns or unidentified objects. However, the most distinctive elements are two anthropomorphic figures carved on the right side of the rear wall. These figures are executed using broad, shallow incised lines and are positioned vertically one above the other (Figure 4).

The upper figure measures approximately 65 cm in total height and displays a stylised human form with clearly defined facial features, including eyes, nose, and mouth. The body is represented by a roughly rectangular torso, and the figure appears to hold an object interpreted as a decorated sword. To the right of this figure, a wavy incised line is also present, although its meaning remains uncertain.

Directly below the upper figure is a second anthropomorphic image measuring approximately 46 cm in height. Like the upper figure, it displays simplified facial features and a rectangular torso. A series of small circular depressions arranged along the central portion of the body have been interpreted as representing tears, suggesting that the figure may be depicted in a crying or mourning posture.

In addition to these more clearly defined motifs, the lower portion of the wall preserves numerous small, shallow linear incisions that differ markedly from the main figures in both scale and execution. These marks are short in length, irregular in orientation, and often occur in clusters of several closely spaced lines, frequently arranged in roughly vertical groupings. Unlike the anthropomorphic engravings, these incisions do not form coherent shapes or identifiable motifs and appear more fragmentary and dispersed across the lower wall surface. Their shallow depth and limited extent make them difficult to detect under standard lighting conditions.



Figure 4: High-resolution 3D visualization of the anthropomorphic face engravings from Fudōbashi Tomb 11. (A) Full slab showing location of the two figures. (B) Detail of the upper figure. (C) Detail of the lower figure.

These anthropomorphic carvings form one of the most distinctive examples of line-engraved imagery from tunnel tombs in the Tokyo region. Although the full extent of the engraved composition cannot be reconstructed due to damage to the wall surface, it is likely that the imagery originally extended across a larger portion of the chamber walls, forming part of a broader decorative programme within the tomb.

Although the Fudōbashi slab is a rare and well-preserved example of anthropomorphic figures in a tunnel tomb, low-relief features such as these are inherently difficult to document using conventional methods. Photography and hand tracing rely heavily on directional lighting to reveal surface topography. In the case of shallow engravings, visibility is highly dependent on light angle. Surface weathering further complicates documentation. The Musashino loam substrate is relatively soft and prone to erosion and abrasion, which can obscure incision edges and introduce surface irregularities. As a result, existing photographs and line drawings cannot fully capture subtle variation in depth and line morphology. High-resolution 3D scanning provides a more effective means of recording these features by directly capturing surface geometry at sub-millimetre precision.

Methods

This study employs a structured workflow for the digital recording and analysis of engraved surfaces (Figure 5). The engraved slab from Fudōbashi Tomb 11 was first recorded using the Artec Spider II, structured-light 3D scanner to capture fine surface geometry. The resulting scan data were then aligned, processed, and converted into a high-resolution polygonal mesh within Artec Studio (V20).

Following data processing, the mesh was examined using visualisation techniques designed to enhance subtle surface variation, including shaded rendering and simulated raking light. These methods allowed the identification of individual incision paths, particularly in areas where shallow engraving is difficult to detect through conventional visual inspection. Finally, quantitative analysis was conducted directly on the three-dimensional surface. Incision segments were traced using geodesic measurement tools, enabling the extraction of length and relative depth metrics for each feature. These measurements form the basis for subsequent comparison of incision morphology and carving technique between the two figures.

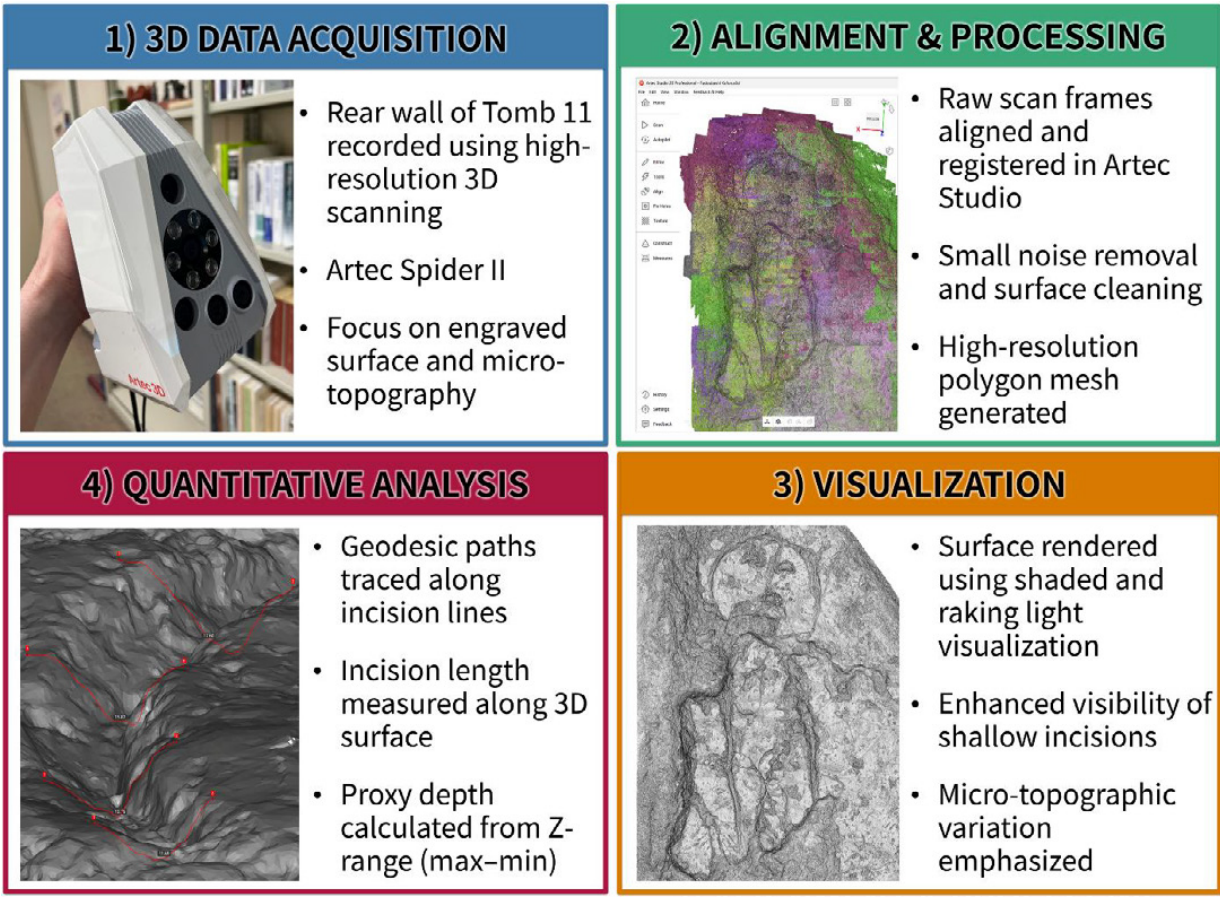

Figure 5: Workflow for 3D recording and analysis of the Fudōbashi Tomb 11 engravings. (1) Data acquisition using structured-light scanning. (2) Alignment and mesh generation. (3) Visualization using shaded and raking light rendering. (4) Quantitative analysis of incision morphology.

Scanning Strategy

To record the engraved slab, scanning was conducted using an Artec Spider II handheld structured-light scanner. The system utilizes blue LED structured-light projection combined with stereo camera triangulation to capture surface geometry, allowing fine-scale detail to be recorded through the deformation of projected light patterns (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Data acquisition using the Artec Spider II structured-light scanner, illustrating close-range scanning of object surfaces.

The Spider II is designed for high-resolution scanning of small to medium-sized objects and provides a maximum geometric resolution of 0.05 mm, enabling the capture of subtle surface variations such as shallow engraved lines.

The scanner was used at close range (approximately 0.19–0.30 m), capturing an area of roughly 200 mm per frame while maintaining high spatial resolution. During acquisition, the scanner was moved across the slab in multiple overlapping passes at different angles to ensure full coverage and reduce occluded areas. Consistent scanning distance and trajectories were maintained, with particular attention given to the engraved regions in order to maximize the capture of fine surface detail.

Data Processing & Analytical Potential of High-Resolution 3D Models

Following data acquisition, raw scan frames were processed in Artec Studio (V20) (Figure 7). Frames were aligned and registered within a common coordinate system using feature-based matching across overlapping scans. The aligned point cloud was then converted into a polygonal mesh, producing a continuous triangulated surface representation of the slab. Subsequent processing included removal of noise and small artefacts, as well as limited gap filling where necessary. The final mesh was rendered using shaded visualisation and adjustable directional lighting to enhance subtle surface variation and improve the visibility of incised features. The resulting three-dimensional model allows detailed inspection of engraved surfaces at multiple scales, enabling direct observation of incision width, depth, and curvature.

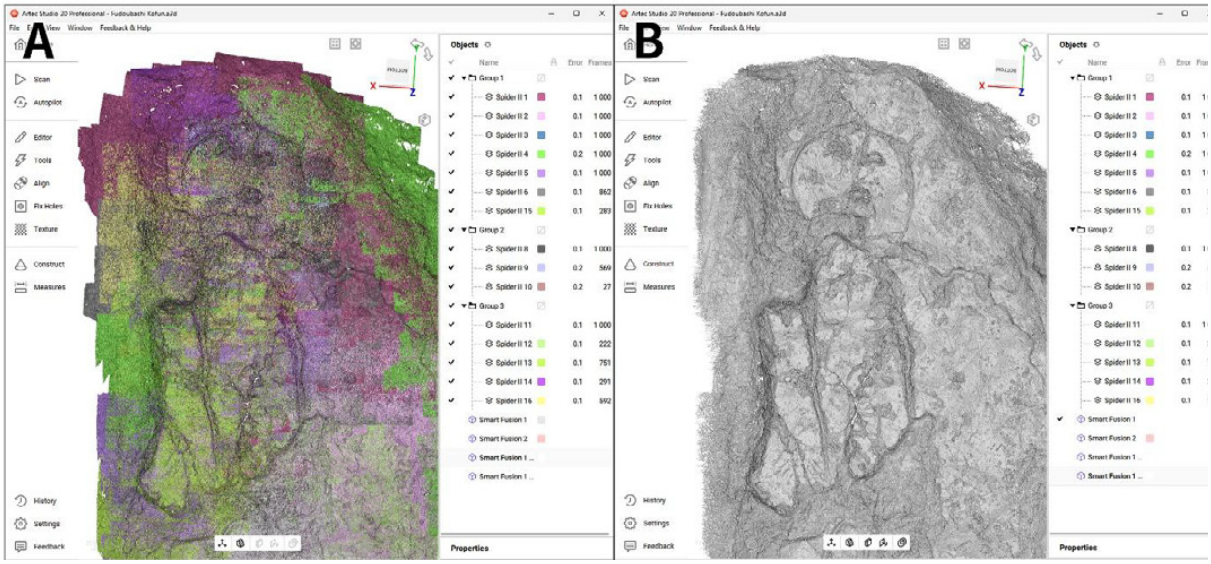

Figure 7: Artec Studio workspace showing scan processing stages. (A) Frame alignment and registration of raw scan data. (B) Final polygonal mesh rendered with shaded visualization to enhance incision morphology.

Captured surface geometry also allows assessment of carving technique, as variations in incision morphology may reflect differences in tool use, motion, and applied force. In addition, the ability to manipulate lighting conditions within the digital environment allows simulation of raking light from multiple directions, improving the visibility of shallow incisions that are difficult to detect under standard conditions. As the original tomb has been destroyed, the model also serves as a permanent digital record of the engraved surface for future analysis.

Visualisation and Statistical Methods

Visualisation and measurement were conducted on the final mesh in Artec Studio (V20). Incision paths were identified using shaded rendering and simulated raking light, with illumination adjusted to enhance subtle surface variation.

Linear extents of individual engraved segments were recorded using geodesic distances, representing the length of each incision as measured along the surface of the slab. Relative incision depth was approximated using the vertical range of the Z-values along each measured path (max Z – min Z),

providing a proxy for variation in surface elevation along the incision. While this metric does not represent true cross-sectional depth perpendicular to the surface, it provides a consistent basis for comparing relative incision intensity across features.

Three sets of data points using non-geodesic and geodesic measurements were taken: 1) Excavation incisions from the time of the tunnel tomb's construction: Fourteen total non-geodesic measurements; 2) Incisions making up the heads of the two figures: A total of twenty incision segments were measured using geodesic distance (ten per figure), 3) Shallow incisions on the lower half of the rear wall: 28 geodesic measurements.

Results: Morphology and Carving Technique

Surface preparation

The rear wall of Tomb 11 exhibits evidence of deliberate surface preparation prior to the execution of the engraved imagery (Figure 8). The distribution of preserved tool marks across the wall is not uniform. The majority of clearly visible excavation striations are concentrated toward the lower portion of the surface, while the upper areas appear comparatively smoother and less visibly marked. One possible interpretation is that the upper wall was deliberately smoothed following initial excavation, reducing the visibility of earlier tool traces and creating a more suitable surface for the subsequent addition of engraved imagery. Alternatively, the apparent reduction in visible striations may reflect differential preservation or later surface alteration affecting the upper portion of the slab.

To quantify the preparation process, a series of linear measurements were taken from preserved surface striations visible across the rear wall, primarily concentrated in the lower zones where tool marks are most clearly retained. These striations are interpreted as the residual traces of individual tool strokes produced during the smoothing phase of chamber excavation. A total of fourteen measurable grooves were recorded, with lengths ranging from 37.8 mm to 55.6 mm (mean = 46.9 mm; standard deviation ≈ 5 mm). The relatively constrained distribution of these values (coefficient of variation ≈ 10–11%) indicates a moderate degree of consistency in stroke length.

This pattern suggests that surface preparation was not conducted through irregular or ad hoc scraping, but rather through repeated, controlled motions of similar scale. The clustering of values between approximately 40 and 52 mm likely reflects a 'natural' working range governed by biomechanical constraints, including arm reach, wrist motion, and tool handling. Such constraints would produce a consistent arc of motion during repeated carving actions, resulting in similarly sized strokes across the prepared surface.

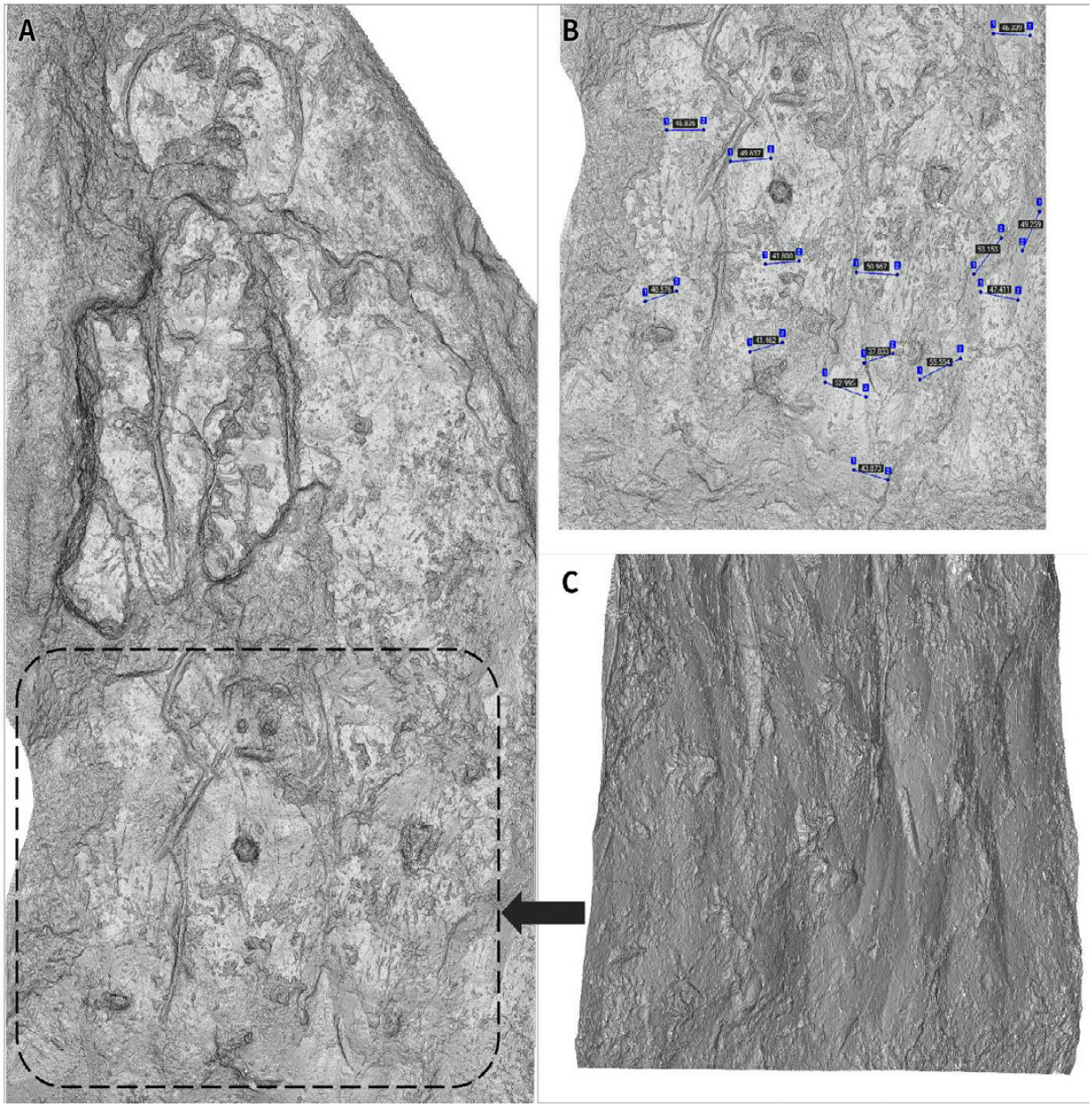

Figure 8: Surface variation and tool marks on the rear wall of Fudōbashi Tomb 11. (A) Overview of the engraved slab showing contrast between upper and lower zones. (B) Distribution of measured striations in the lower wall. (C) Detail of preserved tool marks.

Importantly, the absence of clear bimodal clustering in the stroke-length distribution indicates that the preparation was likely carried out either by a single individual or by multiple individuals employing a standardised technique. Minor deviations at the lower and upper ends of the range (e.g., shorter strokes around 38 mm and longer strokes exceeding 55 mm) may reflect localised constraints, such as working near edges, irregularities in the substrate, or adjustments in body position during carving. The uneven distribution of preserved tool marks suggests that this preparation process may have involved differential treatment of the wall surface. The resulting surface is therefore not merely a byproduct of

chamber excavation, but a deliberately modified plane within the *chaîne opératoire* of tomb construction and decoration.

Morphological differences between the two figures

Detailed inspection of the two anthropomorphic figures reveals consistent differences in incision morphology, particularly in the treatment of outlines and internal features. The upper face (Figure 9A) is defined by relatively narrow, more deeply incised lines. The head outline, especially along the right side, is formed through multiple closely spaced and overlapping strokes, suggesting incremental shaping through repeated passes. This produces a comparatively smooth and controlled curvature. In contrast, the lower face (Figure 9B) is constructed from broader and more irregular incisions that vary in depth and direction, resulting in a more jagged and less consistently defined outline. There is little evidence for repeated refinement, and the head shape appears to have been established more directly.

Incision characteristics

Quantitative measurements indicate that, although both figures display comparable ranges of absolute depth, their incision structures differ in the relationship between stroke length and relative depth. With regards to the upper figure, incision lengths average approximately 11.48, with a corresponding average proxy depth of 3.34. In contrast, the lower figure exhibits longer average stroke lengths of approximately 14.13, with a similar average proxy depth of 3.52. When considered independently, these values suggest little difference in absolute incision depth between the two figures. However, examining the ratio of depth to length reveals a clearer distinction: The upper figure exhibits a higher depth-to-length ratio (≈0.29) than the lower figure (≈0.25), indicating that its incisions tend to be deeper relative to their extent.

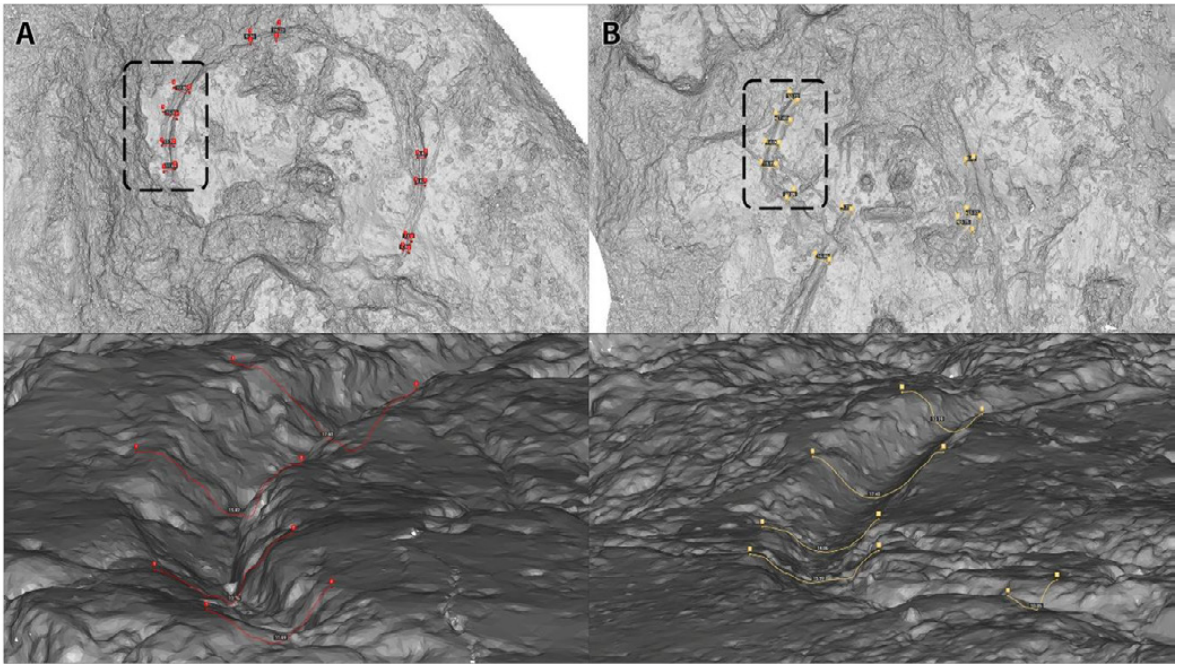

Figure 9: Comparison of incision morphology between the two figures. (A) Upper figure showing shorter, deeper incisions (red). (B) Lower figure showing longer, more diffuse incisions (yellow). Bottom panels: close-up 3D views of traced incision paths.

This distinction is also reflected in the morphology of the engraved lines. In the upper figure, shorter strokes are frequently associated with relatively greater depth, producing more sharply defined and localised incisions. These characteristics are consistent with controlled, repeated carving actions in which the tool engages the surface more directly over shorter distances. The resulting lines appear more deliberate in their execution and contribute to the clearer definition of facial features. By contrast, the lower figure is characterised by longer, more continuous strokes that do not exhibit a proportional increase in depth. Although individual incisions may reach similar absolute depths, their extended length results in a lower depth-to-length ratio overall. This produces broader, more diffuse surface modification, with lines that appear less sharply defined and more irregular in form. Variation is also evident in the internal structure of individual lines. In the upper figure, several incisions, particularly along the right side of the head outline, are composed of multiple overlapping strokes, suggesting incremental shaping through repeated passes.

Visibility of small surface scratches on lower wall

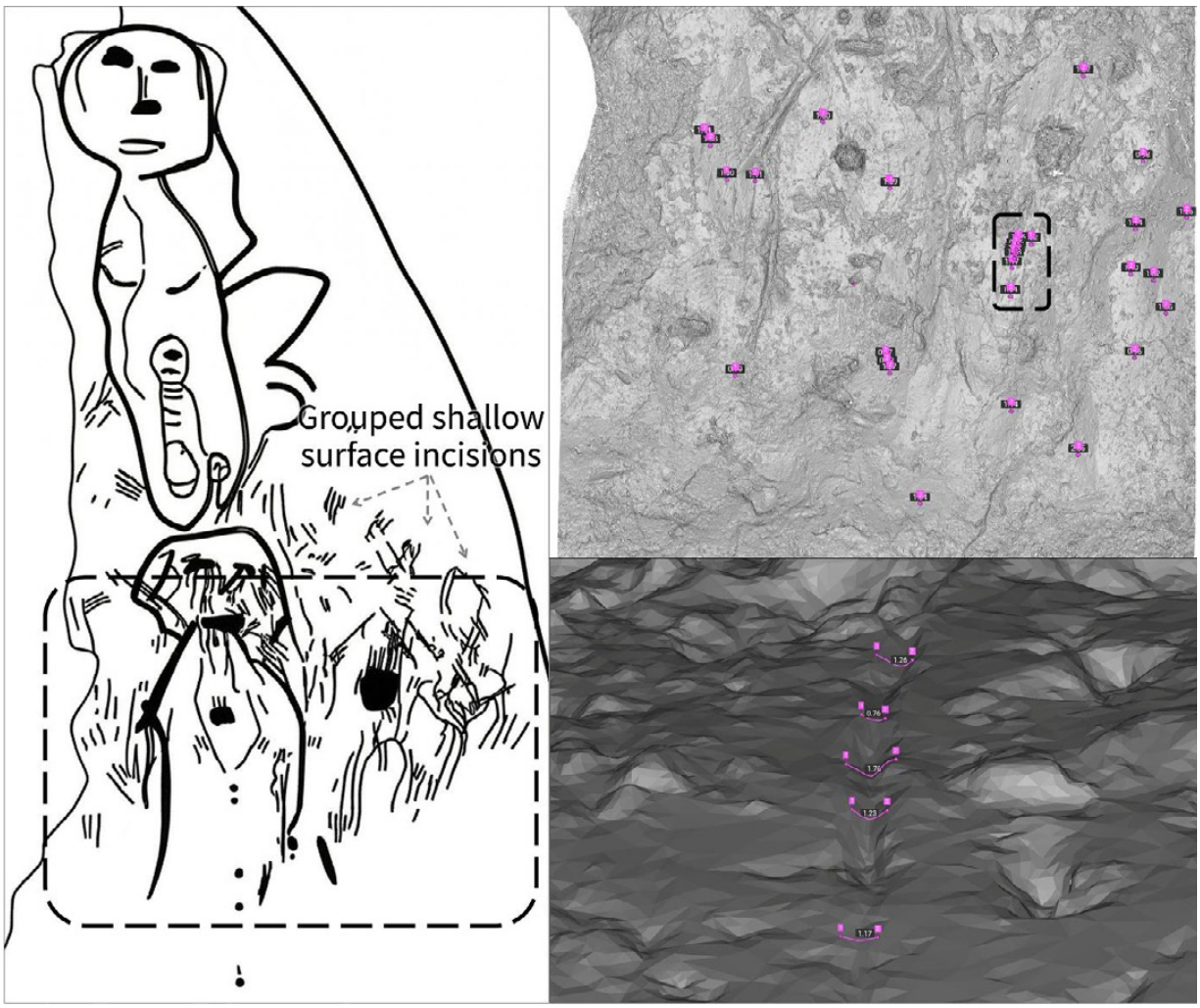

Figure 10 Distribution and morphology of shallow surface incisions on the lower wall. Left: line drawing indicating clustered marks (Modified from Setagaya Ward Board of Education 1999). Top right: location of measured incisions (purple). Bottom right: 3D detail showing low-relief incision structure.

A total of 28 short, shallow surface incisions were analysed from the lower portion of the slab surrounding the lower anthropomorphic figure (Figure 10). These features exhibit consistently small spatial extents, with lengths ranging from 0.67 to 2.05 (mean = 1.25; SD ≈ 0.30). Proxy depth values are similarly limited, ranging from 0.08 to 0.62 (mean = 0.32; SD ≈ 0.15). When normalised relative to length, these marks produce a mean depth-to-length ratio of approximately 0.26, indicating relatively low incision intensity compared to the primary engraved features. In contrast to the more structured incision patterns observed in the anthropomorphic figures, these marks display high variability in orientation and morphology, with no clear evidence of consistent stroke direction or repeated shaping.

These measurements indicate that the lower wall is characterised by numerous short, shallow, and morphologically irregular surface modifications that differ substantially from the more deliberate incision patterns associated with the main figures.

Discussion

Distinct carving practices and execution of the two figures

The two anthropomorphic figures exhibit systematic differences in incision method that are unlikely to reflect minor stylistic variation. Quantitative measurements show that they differ consistently in the relationship between stroke length and depth. The upper figure is characterized by shorter, relatively deeper incisions (higher depth-to-length ratio), whereas the lower figure is composed of longer, more diffuse strokes with lower relative depth.

This distinction is reflected in their morphology. The upper figure shows repeated, overlapping incisions used to incrementally refine form, producing more controlled and sharply defined features. In contrast, the lower figure relies on longer, more continuous marks with limited evidence of reworking, resulting in broader and less regularised forms. These patterns indicate fundamentally different carving strategies. Instead, these results suggest that the figures were differentially produced purposefully. This may reflect differences in tool use, carving gesture, or sequence of production, but more importantly, it indicates that the engraved surface does not represent a single, uniform act of image-making. At minimum, the two figures embody materially different approaches to engraving on the same prepared surface, and could, with further analysis, be interpreted as being an intentional act of execution, to purposefully differentiate the two figures.

Potential secondary surface interaction

A second pattern emerges from the lower portion of the wall, where numerous short, shallow incisions differ markedly from both figures in scale, depth, and organisation. Metric data show that these marks are consistently limited in length and depth, with low depth-to-length ratios and high variability in orientation. Unlike the anthropomorphic figures, they do not form coherent shapes or repeated structural patterns.

Interestingly, both on the section of the wall preserved, as well as the destroyed wall, the upper limit of these incisions, at approximately 743 mm from the base of the wall, suggesting that their incision was restricted to a relatively low working height. When considered alongside their shallow depth and irregular execution, this pattern indicates a markedly lower level of control and applied force compared to the primary engravings. These characteristics point to a different mode of engagement with the surface. Their morphology suggests exploratory or informal marking behaviour, distinct from the structured carving strategies observed in the figures. Importantly, several of these incisions appear to

overlie the anthropomorphic imagery, indicating that they post-date the primary engraving phase. This establishes a clear sequence of interaction: an initial phase of surface preparation and figure production, followed by subsequent episodes of low-intensity marking, however it is impossible to ascertain the intermediate length of time.

Considering 1) the seemingly abstract, borderline random nature of these shallow incisions, 2) the limited height of the incisions, 3) the grouped and shallow nature of the incisions, and 4) the extremely soft nature of Musashino loam, it is not out of the realm of possibility that these incisions could have been made by a small child, either shortly after the excavation of the tunnel tomb, or even much later. The shallow incised lines often group in vertical lines of 3-5, but no more than 5, and resemble a long scratch mark made from possibly fingernails. According to Nagaoka et al. (2008), the average height of and adult man and woman during the Kofun period in the Kanto region was 163.1 cm and 151.5 cm, respectively. A working height of 743 mm would be consistent with an individual of approximately 90–105 cm in stature. According to established growth standards (WHO 2006), this range corresponds broadly to a young child (ca. 2–4 years old). Given their low height, shallow depth, and irregular execution, these marks may have been produced by a smaller individual, potentially a child, although this interpretation remains tentative.

While this estimate remains approximate and dependent on posture and working conditions, it provides a plausible explanation for the limited vertical distribution, shallow incision depth, and reduced control observed in these marks. Rather than representing formal image production, these features are consistent with low-intensity marking produced by an individual operating under restricted reach and reduced motor control.

Conclusions: Digital Preservation and Future Research

The engraved slab from Tomb 11 of the Fudōbashi tunnel tomb group provides a rare example of anthropomorphic imagery within the tunnel tomb tradition of eastern Japan. Although the figures have been known since excavation, their shallow execution has limited detailed analysis using conventional recording methods.

High-resolution 3D scanning reveals that the Fudōbashi slab preserves a complex, multi-phase sequence of surface interaction rather than a single artistic event. This process began with deliberate wall preparation, evidenced by a regularised upper zone that contrasts with the primary excavation tool marks preserved below. Following this, the two anthropomorphic figures were executed using distinct carving strategies: the upper figure was shaped through controlled, overlapping, and relatively deep strokes, while the lower figure was defined by longer, more diffuse marks. This primary phase was subsequently followed by episodes of informal, low-intensity marking—possibly by a smaller individual—as indicated by shallow, irregular scratches that cut across the main imagery and are restricted to a lower working height.

These findings demonstrate that even simple metric data derived from 3D models can recover nuanced *chaînes opératoires* in low-relief archaeological contexts. In cases such as Fudōbashi, where the original tomb has been lost, the creation of a detailed digital record ensures that these subtle production sequences remain accessible for future comparative research.

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PART II:

ICONOGRAPHY, BELIEF, AND INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER 5

ENCIRCLING THE AFTERLIFE: INTERPRETING CIRCULAR IMAGERY IN TOMBS AS APOTROPAIC AND COSMIC SYMBOLS

DOREEN THIERFELDER[1]

This paper examines the significance of circular motifs in decorated tombs of Kofun period Japan. Contemporary analogies—such as that the red circle on the Japanese flag symbolises the sun—may suggest a straightforward reading of circular motifs, yet this study demonstrates that such interpretations are oversimplified. Based on a dataset compiled from research reports and museum catalogues, it analyses the distribution, colour, form, and contextual placement of circular motifs. Circles appear in approximately one quarter of the known decorated kofun, with red rings and concentric circles on the rear wall of the burial chamber being the most common. Their placement in the upper part of a wall and on the ceilings suggests associations with celestial objects such as the sun, moon, or stars, while earlier examples may represent bronze mirrors. Despite the majority of circular motifs having been found in northern Kyushu, regional differences in form, placement and associated motifs were identified. However, the consistent use of red colouring, placement and embedded polysemy in the circular motifs suggest that circles functioned as apotropaic symbols within the funerary context. This study demonstrates that single-meaning interpretations are insufficient and that circular motifs operated within a complex, context-dependent symbolic system in Japan's protohistory.

***Keywords**: Protohistoric Japan, Kofun Period, Decorated Tombs, Circular Motifs, Red colour*

死後世界を取り巻く円形表現ー装飾古墳における円文の魔除け的・天文的象徴としての解釈

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本稿は、装飾古墳に見られる円文について再検討することを目的としたものである。本論ではイコノロジー的視点から、円文の表現方法や配列、および高句麗や中国からの壁画の影響を分析する。円文が確認される装飾古墳は計 236 基にのぼり、全体の約 4 分の 1 を占める。円文は九州北部の装飾古墳の約 50%に認められる一方、関東地方、中国地方および四国の装飾古墳では 10%未満にとどまる。これは、信念体系に地域差が存在した可能性を示唆するものである。また、単色の輪状文や同心円が最も一般的な形状であるのに対し、複雑な円文構成は、装飾性の高い古墳に限定されている。円文は 4 世紀半ばに遡る石棺にも刻まれており、装飾古墳において初期の文様と位置づけられる。当時の円文は銅鏡を象徴すると考えられ、これは、銅鏡が当時において祭具や権威に関わる重要な象徴であったことから推察される。その後、古墳時代中期以降には彩色例が増加し、全体の 60%以上を占める。そのうち約 95%が赤色であり、縄文時代以来、赤色は死者の魂を鎮め、死者・生者双方に対して魔除けとしての役割を果

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たすと信じられたことに由来すると考えられる。当該時期になると、円文は銅鏡に加え、太陽、月、星などの天体を象徴する可能性も指摘できる。王塚古墳の天井の円文装飾は、キトラ古墳や高松塚古墳と同様、中国や高句麗の壁画の影響を受けた星図表現とも考えられ、こうした夜空や太陽を象徴する天井装飾は、墓内を照らし死者の魂を鎮める意図を有していた可能性がある。しかし、天体表現は天井に限定されず、奥壁や側壁に円文が描かれる事例も確認されている。また松前健によると、珍敷塚古墳をはじめ、船上に円文が描かれたモチーフは「太陽の船」への信仰を表現すると考えられている。しかし、この種の事例は少数にとどまり、分布状況からみて太陽の船の信仰との直接的関連は想定しがたい。さらに、奥壁に併置される二つの円文は目を表し、魔除け的機能を担った可能性がある。入口付近の円状の点も同様、外部からの邪悪な侵入を防ぐ意図で配置されたと考えられる。円文の多くは奥壁に単独、あるいは三角文と組み合わされて描かれ、象形文様との結合は稀である。このように、円文は、銅鏡の持つ魔除け、呪術的意味に由来する可能性があるものの、円文を単純に銅鏡の象徴とみなすことはできない。むしろ、円文は銅鏡と天体という複雑な象徴的力を内包する多義的なシンボルである。とりわけ、赤色に彩られた円文は、古墳人にとって最も強力な魔除けの象徴として認識されていたと結論付けられる。

キーワード：古墳時代、装飾古墳、円文の象徴的機能、赤色の呪術的機能、魔除けのシンボル

Introduction

A total of 849 decorated *kofun* have been identified throughout the Japanese archipelago, extending from the Tohoku region in northeastern Honshu to southern Kyushu. The majority of these burials are located in northern Kyushu, in the modern prefectures of Kumamoto and Fukuoka (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025: 3). Approximately 28% of all decorated *kofun* include depictions of circles, including 28 stone coffins, as well as about one hundred tunnel tombs and an almost equal number of stone chambers in burial mounds. Circles, together with the so-called *chokkomon* motifs,[2] are the first motifs used to decorate stone coffins dating back to the latter fourth century. In the early fifth century motifs such as triangles and quivers appear, whereas anthropomorphic designs are found no earlier than the sixth century (Takagi 2004: 377–379). However, the introduction of figural motifs did not replace the circular motifs. Circles continued to be used in decorated tombs until the early eighth century. Therefore, the belief system of the Kofun people seems to be characterised by a deep symbolism attached to circular motifs.

This study is based on data compiled from the Research Bulletin No. 17 of the Kumamoto Prefectural Decorated Tumulus Museum (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025), the comprehensive investigation report of decorated tombs of Kumamoto prefecture (Takagi 1984), and the catalogue of the special exhibition 'Decorated Tombs in Japan' (National Museum of Japanese History 1993), supplemented by the Kumamoto Prefectural Decorated Tumulus Museum series *Zenkoku no sōshoku kofun shirīzu*. The data on decorated tombs with circular motifs in Kofun period Japan were primarily obtained through analysis of images and planimetric documentation, with excavation and investigation reports used where such materials were unavailable.

[2] The *chokkomon* motif is a design of intersecting straight and curved lines, which occurs on various Kofun period objects, including bronze mirrors, shell bracelets and stone coffins.

This paper will first examine the locations and methods of application of circles in decorated *kofun*. Of particular relevance are the colours used for the circular designs and the associated motifs. The subsequent discussion will address varying interpretations of circles, and will conclude with an evaluation of their significance in protohistoric Japan.

Circular Depictions in Burial Contexts

The largest number of decorated tombs with circles is found in northern Kyushu (Figure 1). In total, 78% of decorated tombs with circular motifs are located in this region (n=184). In the northeastern part of Honshu, in the following referred to as the Tohoku and Kanto regions, 13 decorated tombs with circular motifs were identified in each region, accounting for a combined total of 11%. Eight tombs with circles were located in southern Kyushu, five in the Chubu region, three in the Chugoku region and only one on the island of Shikoku. Given that the largest number of decorated *kofun* in general is located in northern Kyushu, this finding alone is not particularly meaningful. However, considering the percentage of these motifs in all decorated tombs within a specific region, it becomes evident that circular motifs were present in half of all decorated *kofun* in northern Kyushu. In the Chubu region one quarter of the decorated tombs contained such motifs. In the Tohoku and Kinki regions approximately 15% of the decorated *kofun* contained circular motifs, followed by 11% in southern Kyushu. Even though a large number of decorated tombs is located in the Kanto region, only 9% display circular motifs. The smallest percentage of circular motifs in a specific region is found in Shikoku with only 6% and the Chugoku region with only 3% of the local decorated tombs. It appears that circular motifs had the highest significance in the region of northern Kyushu and were least important as symbols in the Kanto and Chugoku regions as well as in Shikoku, where petroglyphs were used more frequently than paint (see Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025: 4–8).

Circular motifs are most frequently located in the burial chamber. Approximately 39% of the circles have been applied at the rear wall of the burial chamber. Consequently, these motifs are in close proximity to the main burial, and thus, they are the first visual element that a person entering the burial will observe. In a fourth of decorated tombs with circular motifs, these motifs are located on the side walls of the burial chamber. However, more than half of the tombs displaying circular motifs on the side walls also show circles on the back wall. A mere 10% of burials with circles display these motifs exclusively on the side walls. Nevertheless, other motifs may be present on the rear wall of the tomb, as seen in the mid-sixth century Ōzuka Kofun in Keisen (Fukuoka prefecture), which does not feature circles but red, green, black and yellow triangles.

The placement of circles on the ceiling of the burial chamber or within corridors is rather rare, each occurring in a mere 6% of the decorated tombs with circular motifs. Most burials with circles on the ceiling are found in tunnel tombs in the Tohoku region as well as in tunnel tombs and corridor-style burial chambers in Miyazaki prefecture. Of particular interest, however, are the circular motifs on the ceiling of the aforementioned Ōzuka Kofun, as well as the late seventh to early eighth-century Kitora Kofun and the Takamatsuzuka Kofun in Asuka (Nara prefecture). Circles in corridors are predominantly found in northern Kyushu. Such tombs frequently also show decorations in the burial chamber, suggesting a general tendency towards rich decorated burial structures.

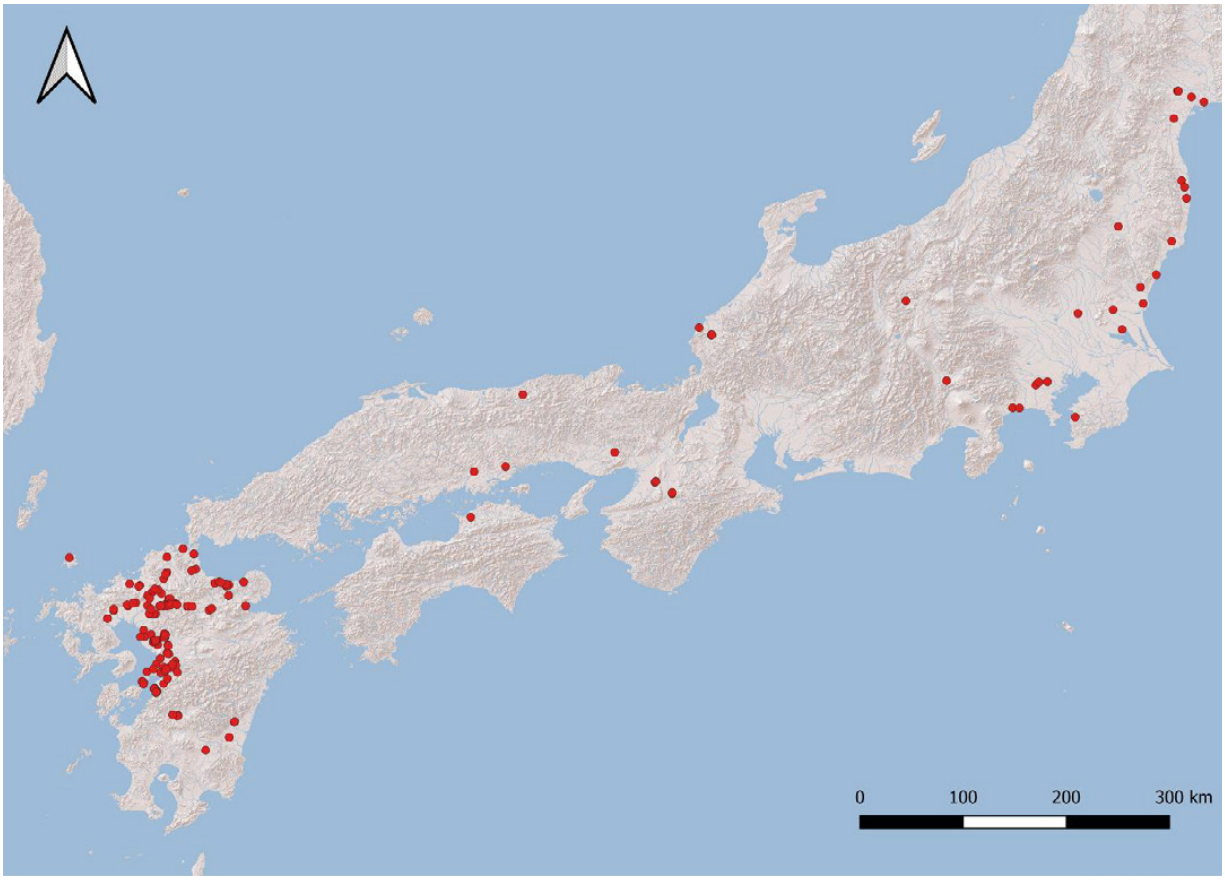

Figure 1: Distribution map of decorated *kofun* with circular motifs. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 3.30.4).

However, circular motifs were not only applied inside the burial construction. Approximately 20% of the tombs with circular motifs display circles at the outside wall, above or around the entrance of a tunnel tomb. These occur along the Kikuchi River in Tamana (Kumamoto prefecture) as well as on the southern coastal area of the Gulf of Suo, between the modern cities of Usa and Nakatsu in Oita prefecture. Furthermore, the Hyakudomi tunnel tombs No. 1 to 3 in Koge (Fukuoka prefecture) display red and yellow circles around the entrance (Hasabe 1997: 78). It should be noted that almost half of the tunnel tombs in Oita prefecture feature circles at the entrance but not on the ceiling. It therefore appears that the placement of circles at the entrance as well as on the ceiling may represent regional customs.

Circles were applied by painting, carving, chiselling or engraving. In approximately 40% of the decorated tombs with circles, no traces of paint on the circular motifs are preserved, despite the possibility of paint having been applied which has since degraded. This is substantiated by the observation that in approximately 5% of these tombs traces of paint have been found in other areas of the tomb, albeit not on the circular motifs. On the other hand, 10% of the tombs without painted circles were applied on a red background. The burials with red background excluded, a third of the decorated tombs with circles show no traces of painted circles.

In contrast, 149 decorated *kofun* with circular motifs display painted circles. The predominant colour of circles is red, being found in more than 95% of the tombs with painted circles (Figure 2). Approximately 80% of these tombs contain monochrome red circles, while some red circles are combined with green,

blue, white, black and yellow. Solid white circles are present in ten tombs, while green, blue and black circles occur in four tombs each. Monochrome, solid yellow, gold and silver circles are present in two tombs each. It therefore is evident, that red is the most common colour for circular motifs.

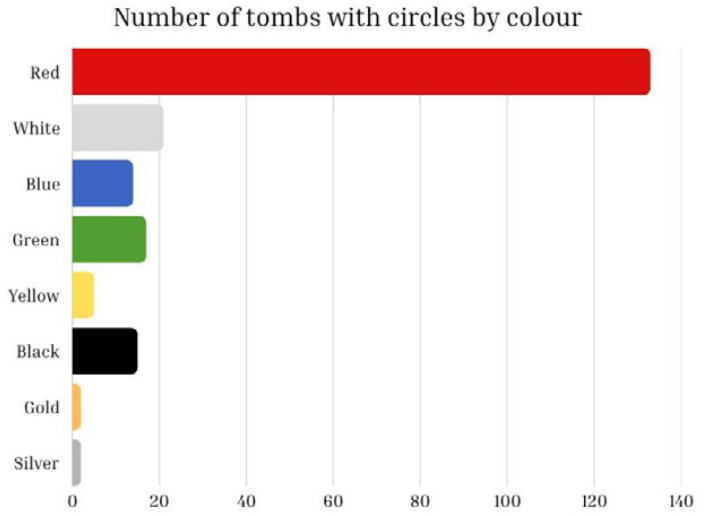

Figure 2: Number of tombs with circles by colour. As colours can occur multiple times and in combination with each other, the total number of painted tombs may exceed 100% (n=149). (Source: the author)

In Kofun period Japan, two kinds of red have been used: the reddish-brown *bengala* (ferric oxide), which is found in almost all parts of the Japanese archipelago due to the high volcanic activity and the resulting iron-rich soil, as well as the bright red cinnabar (mercury sulphide). The latter is either naturally occurring or can be produced by combining mercury and sulphur. It is unknown if the Kofun people were able to produce cinnabar on a larger scale but it is indicated in Chinese written records that the Chinese court sent cinnabar to the Japanese archipelago since the Late Yayoi period (Ichige 1984: 32–35; Seyock 2004: 57; Sugiyama and Shiga 2018: 62).

However, red colour had been in use since the Initial Jōmon period for ceramics, adornment, ritual objects and funerals. The usage within funerals peaked in the Kofun period and ends in the mid-sixth century (Honda 1995: 73; Ichige 1984: 36–45). This extensive use of red requires a detailed investigation of its meaning. Ichige suggests that red colour was used to repose the soul of the deceased (Ichige 1984: 69). However, depending on the time and region, red was also associated with blood, life, aggression, danger, authority, sun or fire (Scarre 2002: 228–229; Chapman 2002: 50). Within Taoist belief systems in China, cinnabar was regarded as a component of the legendary elixir of life, believed to prevent aging and death (Tsude 1992: 69). In Palaeolithic and Neolithic eastern Europe, Anatolia and the Mediterranean, specific body parts of the deceased have been painted in red, perhaps to protect them from evil forces (Boriç 2002: 28). A similar burial custom is found on the Japanese archipelago: red colour was most often applied around the head of the deceased but also inside the burial structure (Honda 1995: 73–74; Ichige 1984: 63–64). The people on the Japanese archipelago therefore may have believed in the apotropaic powers of the colour red, which should protect the deceased in a magical way. Anthropomorphic *haniwa*, appearing at the end of the fifth century, also show red paint on their face or

clothing. These figures were placed on burial mounds and may be clay representations of the funerary participants. The red facial colouring perhaps served to protect the bereaved from the spirit of the deceased or may represent tattoos (Ichige 1984: 180, 184; Seyock 2004: 52). In conclusion, it appears that the colour red was believed to possess apotropaic powers in pre- and protohistoric Japan.

Within this framework, a total of 19 distinct forms of circles have been identified. The most common circular form is a ring, found in approximately 40% of decorated *kofun* with circles, followed by monochrome, double concentric circles in approximately 30% of the tombs. Monochrome solid circles comprise approximately 20% of the total. Small, monochromatic dots have been found in 24 tombs, 7 of which display dots on the ceiling. In addition, multicoloured concentric circles have been found, particularly in Fukuoka prefecture. In 17 tombs circles with straight or curved lines attached to the outer rim have been identified, while circular motifs with a cross or radiating lines in the interior occur in 10 tombs. The rarest circles are those that can be identified as physical objects, such as mirrors or the sun.

Furthermore, analysis of accompanied motifs—defined here as motifs in close proximity to the circular motifs on the same wall—reveals that circles often appear alongside other circles or triangles. Approximately a quarter of all tombs with circular motifs feature no other motifs on the same wall besides identical circles. A mere 14% of the circles are accompanied by boats, 13% by archery items such as bow, arrow, quiver or hand guard, and a further 12% with anthropomorphic figures. Less than 10% of the circles are displayed in proximity to horses or defensive objects such as shields or armour. Edged and pointed weapons are rarely found in proximity to circular motifs. Therefore, circles appear to occur most frequently with other geometrical motifs, while narrative scenes with anthropomorphic figures, animals, boats and weapons are rather rare. Additionally, there appears to be no connection between particular circle types and the accompanied motifs. However, the richness of the accompanying motifs is often proportional to the complexity of the depicted circular motifs.

Decoding circular motifs

The following discussion will examine the various interpretations of circles, beginning with the unambiguous and progressing to more challenging interpretations. Firstly, the interpretation of circles as mirrors is considered. The subsequent part examines the interpretation of circles as celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and stars. It is also possible to interpret circular motifs as eyes. However, given the quality of the depictions and the lack of associated motifs for a significant number of the decorated tombs with circular motifs, a broader interpretation as an apotropaic symbol will also be discussed.

Mirror Symbolism in Circular Motifs

On five stone slabs of the Nagasako Kofun in Yatsushiro (Kumamoto prefecture) dating to the mid-fifth century, multiple depictions of circles have been found. It is not clear whether the stone slabs belong to a stone cist or if they were a slab partition in a burial chamber. Two stone slabs measure 2.15 m in length and 85 cm in height; the best preserved of them is currently displayed at the Tokyo National Museum (Figure 3). Six circles were carved into the stone. Four of these circles exhibit a continuous triangular pattern along the outer part of the interior section, as well as a line which extends upwards from the upper edge of the circle. Another stone slab of the Nagasako Kofun is currently located at the Hinagu-Aso shrine and exhibits similar depictions (Otomasu 1984: 174–175).

At the slab partition in the corridor-style stone chamber in the Ōtobana-minami Kofun in Kami-Amakusa (Kumamoto prefecture), dating to the latter fifth century, similar mirror depictions have been found. The south wall featured three concentric circles. Two circles are shown above each other and

display a sawtooth pattern in the outer section of the circle as well as lines extending upwards. However, these details were omitted at the concentric circle closest to the tomb entrance (Kuma 1984: 148–149).

The bronze mirrors with triangular rim and deity and beast motifs (*Sankakubuchi-shinjū-kyō*), as well as domestic produced bronze mirrors from the Early and Middle Kofun periods, often show this so-called sawtooth pattern in the outer field (Morishita 2002: 313–314) (Figure 4). A round knob with a horizontal opening through which a cord or ribbon can be threaded is located at the centre of the mirror's back side. The lines extending upwards as well as the sawtooth pattern suggest that the circular motifs on the aforementioned stone slabs represent hanging bronze mirrors. However, the depiction is not realistic, as the mirror decoration and the knob are both located on the back side of the mirror. This implies that the cords should be visible inside the circle as well, yet this is not the case. It therefore appears that only the most significant features were emphasised. This is an intriguing observation, because the main motif of the mirror, located in the inner area of the back side, has been omitted from all depictions of mirrors, suggesting that it probably did not hold great significance in the Middle Kofun period.

It should be noted that both burials are early decorated tombs and found not far apart from each other. However, circles which may represent mirrors have also been found on stone coffins outside of Kumamoto. On the lid of the boat-shaped coffin from the Oyamadani Kofun in Fukui (Figure 3), dating to end of the fourth century, four concentric circles can be seen on both sides of the lid (Sakaguchi 2017: 3). The inner part of these circles is raised and may represent the central knob of a bronze mirror. On the lid of the house-shaped stone coffin of the Sekijinsan Kofun in Hirokawa (Fukuoka) dating to the early fifth century five concentric circles similar to the circles on the stone slabs of the Ōtobana-minami Kofun can be seen. These circles might also represent mirrors and applied on the coffin to prevent evil from disturbing the peace in death (Takagi 2004: 377).

Bronze mirrors in protohistoric Japan are believed to possess apotropaic powers (Ōgata 2009: 26). Despite a decline in the number and significance of mirrors from the end of the fourth century onwards (Morishita 1991: 805), the application of mirror depictions on stone coffins suggests that they continued to be regarded as apotropaic symbols and ritual objects. Given the rapid decline in the number of bronze mirrors during this time, it also seems plausible that, instead of being physically placed in the tomb as burial goods, they were engraved into stone (Takagi 2004: 378).

In contrast, it is not possible to interpret painted circles as mirrors. However, it is notable that circles are often depicted in proximity to triangular motifs. This association between circular and continuous triangular designs may have originated from the form and motifs on bronze mirrors. Furthermore, bronze mirrors have been placed predominantly in close proximity to the head of the deceased (Morishita 2016: 186). Circular depictions are often applied on the rear wall of the tomb, in other words, close to but not necessarily next to the head of the deceased. Although there appears to be no clear correlation between the location of mirrors and circular motifs in the tomb, both have been positioned close to the deceased, probably for protection.

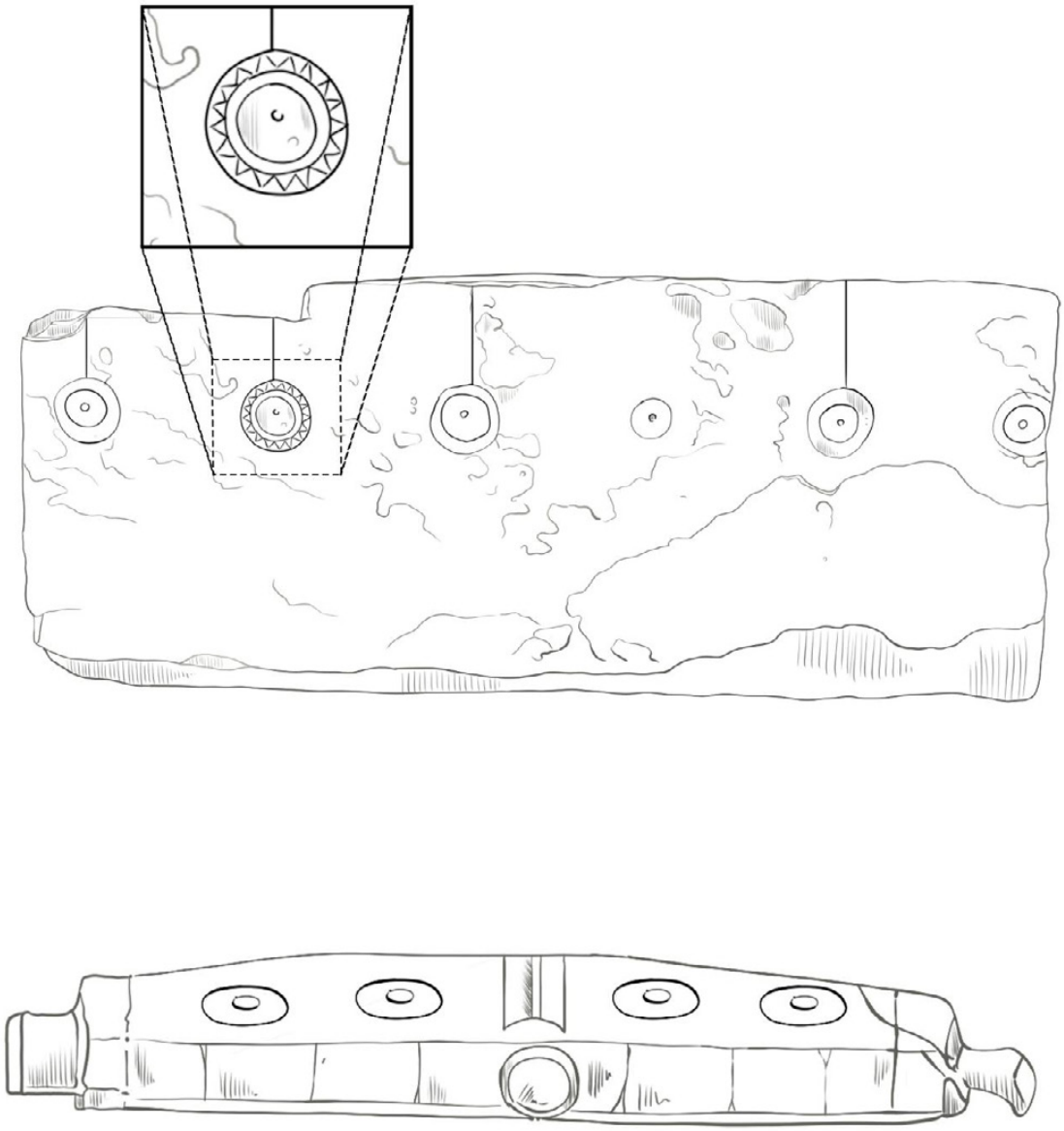

Figure 3: Stone slab of Nagasako Kofun in the Tōkyō National Museum (top) (redrawn by Luise Kühnemund from photograph of Nagasako stone slab at the Tōkyō National Museum by author) and stone lid of the Oyamadani Kofun (bottom) (redrawn by Luise Kühnemund from Yanagisawa 2022: 25).



Figure 4: Domestic bronze mirror of the type Daryū-kyō with a round central knob, dragon-like, coiled beasts with long necks in the inner area and a double sawtooth-pattern in the outer area. Tōkyō National Museum Inv.-No. J-35507 (modified by author from ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan (https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

Solar Significance of the Circles

Circular motifs may also depict the sun. Matsumae Takeshi believes it is more than a mere coincidence, that concentric circles appear frequently in decorated tombs in northern Kyushu and that they are likely to represent the sun (Matsumae 1961: 41).[3] The depiction on the rear wall of the Mezurashizuka Kofun in Ukiha (Fukuoka prefecture) dates to the latter sixth century and comprises a boat, anthropomorphic figures, quivers, shields, *warabitemon*, birds, a toad, and circles (Figure 5).[4] The left side of the picture displays a boat with two masts, perhaps depicting a sail. On the boat, which is facing towards the centre of the scene, an anthropomorphic figure holding an oar is depicted, as well as a bird which is sitting on the bow. A concentric circle in red and blue is depicted above the boat, with eleven red dots along its outer edge. This depiction of a circle is unique in its conception, and may have been inspired by the image of a sun with rays radiating outwards.

Matsumae suggests that this particular image is the depiction of a solar boat. The solar boat is a belief that the sun is travelling over the sky with a boat, either in an anthropomorphic form, as a circle or a swastika. Depictions of a boat with a circular sun or a figural sun deity are found in Ancient Egypt and along the coastal regions of Bronze Age Scandinavia and the Mediterranean. The solar boats might be a combination of two different perceptions of the people living at coastal areas: first, the soul of the deceased is travelling with the sun to the land of the sun and second, the realm of the deities and the dead is located beyond the ocean. Such depictions of the sun were not simple decoration but powerful symbols which ensured that the deceased had a safe journey to the afterlife (Matsumae 1961: 23–26).

[3] Matsumae Takeshi (1922–2002) was one of Japan's leading mythologists and religious scholars.

[4] Recent analysis of the Sue ware pottery recovered from the tomb suggests a date in the early seventh century (Kojima 2025: 283). However, given the stylistic characteristics of the mural painting and the possibility of secondary burials, the late sixth-century date is adopted in the present study.

However, only eight circular motifs above a boat or a boat-shaped deathbed can be identified on the Japanese archipelago (Figure 6). They are found at the southern reaches of the Chikugo River in Fukuoka prefecture, at the Kusu River in Oita prefecture and at the Kikuchi River in Kumamoto prefecture. With the exception of the Onizuka Kofun at the southern reaches of the Kusu River in Oita prefecture, all rivers flow into the Ariake Sea, with none situated along the coastline. Considering the shift in the coastline, it is possible that the tombs were in fact located closer to the sea during the Kofun period. However, on the opposite coast of the Ariake Sea lies the Tara mountains and the Shimabara Peninsula, where the active volcano Mount Unzen is visible to the naked eye from the coasts of Fukuoka and Kumamoto. It therefore is difficult to assume that the Kofun people believed in an otherworld beyond the ocean. Furthermore, if the concept of a solar boat was indeed applicable, it would have been limited to a specific region in northern Kyushu and the latter half of the sixth century.

Another possible explanation for these 'solar boat' depictions is that of a narrative scene. The boat could also represent a journey during daytime, symbolised by the circular sun but also with other elements on the boat such as horses, which may have been imported by boat (see also Zancan and Stein, this volume). Thus, these depictions may reflect trading activities through which the deceased gained power during lifetime and consequently function as status symbols rather than as expressions of religious beliefs about the afterlife.



Figure 5: Mural on the rear wall of the Mezurashizuka Kofun. (Redrawn by the author from National Museum of Japanese History 1993: 35).

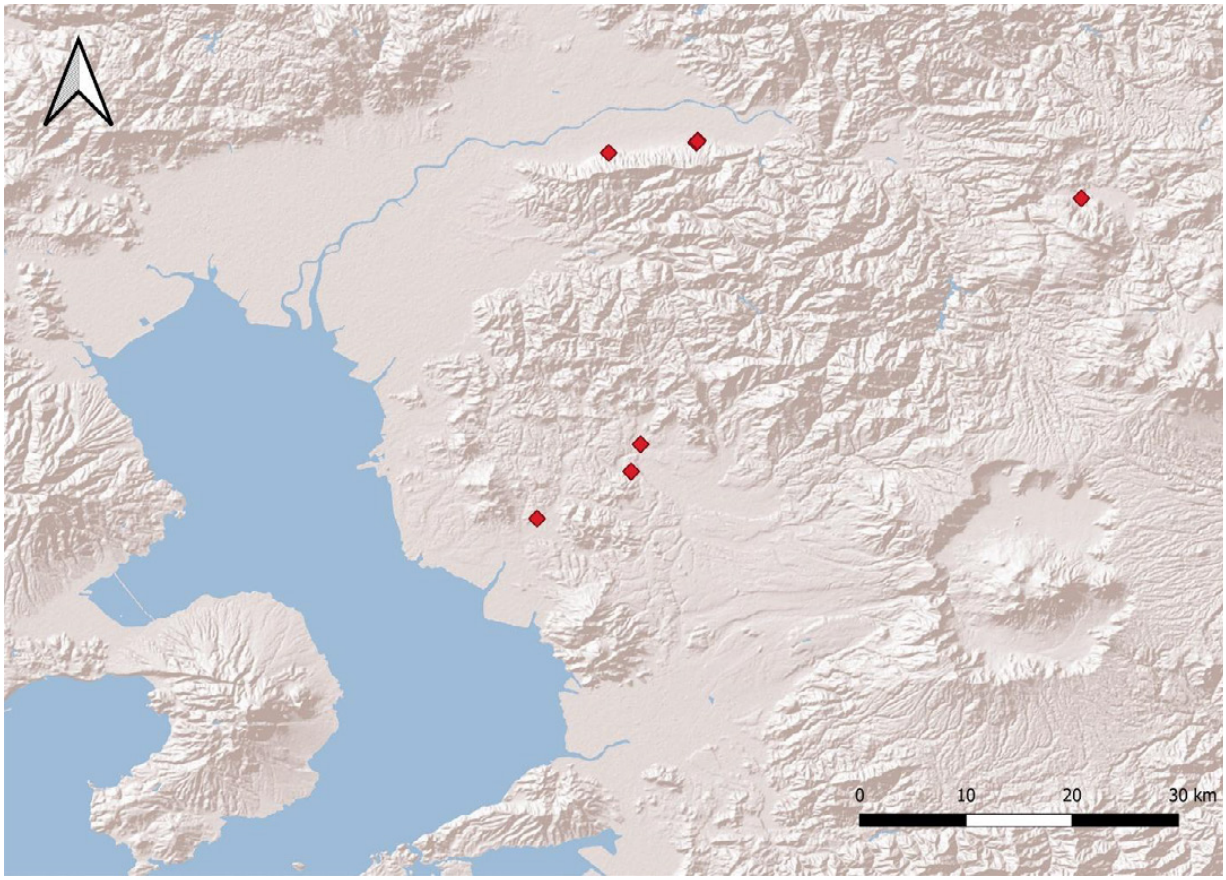

Figure 6: Map of decorated *kofun* with 'solar boat' depictions. The Mezurashizuka Kofun, Torifunezuka Kofun, and Haru Kofun are positioned in close proximity to each other and to the Kuma Tunnel tomb No. 3, which is situated approximately 9 km to the west. The Onizuka Kofun in Ōita is located furthest to the east. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 3.30.4).

Both 'solar boats' of the Torifunetsuka Kofun and the aforementioned Mezurashizuka Kofun also display representations of birds. Matsumae suggests that birds are symbols of the sun and therefore another indication that the depicted boats are solar boats (Matsumae 1961: 38). In Bronze Age Scandinavia as well, water birds are believed to be associated with the sun as they can dive, swim and fly, just like the sun (Kaul 1998: 245). In Chinese religious beliefs since the Neolithic period but especially during the Han period, a three-legged crow was said to live in the sun (Ikezawa 2002: 12). Within the context of cultural exchanges with China, depictions of the three-legged sun crow were also adopted in Koguryŏ mural paintings between the fourth and seventh centuries (Yang 2025: 6–7; Shin et al. 2020: 227). However, it is not clear whether the Kofun people were aware of this belief in the latter half of the sixth century. The earliest evidence for solar crows can be seen in the sun depictions of the Kitora Kofun and Takamatsuzuka Kofun from the late seventh to early eight centuries. In these decorated tombs the sun is depicted on the eastern wall as a golden circle with a three-legged crow in the centre (Tamura 2008: 7).

Archery is featured to a similar extent as boats in tombs with circular motifs. A connection to the sun can also be drawn when considering Chinese texts such as the *Chuci* (second century AD), the *Shānhaijīng* (fourth century BC to first century AD) and the *Huainanzi* (second century BC). According to these books, ten suns existed, which took turns to appear in the sky, and each sun was home to a crow. The legend

of the divine archer Yi or Houyi states that on one occasion, all ten suns rose in the sky simultaneously and threatened to burn the world. Therefore, Yi shot nine of the ten sun-crows, thus preventing the world from being destroyed (Mori 2002: 34; Yang and An 2005: 9, 95–96). In contrast, Mayumi suggests that bows and arrows may have been used occasionally as ritual objects in solar rituals in ancient Japan (Mayumi 2018: 192–193). However, in the present example as in the previous one, it is uncertain if the Kofun people were aware of the Chinese legends, or whether archery was more likely to have been associated with an apotropaic function as with the sun.

Furthermore, some circles in decorated tombs have been applied on the ceiling of the burial chamber. In the Daiman tunnel tomb No. 1 of group III in Futtsu (Chiba prefecture) dating to the early seventh century, a circle with radiating lines was carved in the centre of the dome-shaped ceiling. Similar structures have been found in the underground corridor-style burial chambers in southern Kyushu. Although this motif may appear as a sun with radiating rays, it is more likely to resemble a hipped roof, as square motifs are also depicted in the corresponding position in tombs in Miyazaki. However, Kamihokita tunnel tomb No. 19 features an engraved sun, which may have been intended to enlighten the dark tomb and guide the soul on its journey to the otherworld (Chiba-ken bunkazai sentā 1979: 158; Mogami 1995: 38–41).

In conclusion, some of the circles in decorated tombs may represent the sun. However, the depiction of the circle itself, whether in colour or in relief, provides no indication as to whether the circle represents a sun. The identification of a circle as a sun is dependent upon the placement and the particular context in which it occurs.

Night Sky Imagery

On the right side of the scene on the rear wall of Mezurashizuka Kofun another concentric circle has been depicted. The outer circle is painted in blue, the inner circle in red. The motif is accompanied by a toad on the left side, an anthropomorphic figure holding a shield diagonally above, as well as a bird and another animal below. Since in Han period China the toad is an animal which is associated with the moon, this particular concentric circle is often interpreted as the moon (Tatsumi 1992: 175; Yang and An 2005: 88). Furthermore, two red circles, the interpretation of which is unclear, are depicted on the right wall of the narrative scene (Ishiyama 1993: 181).

In the aforementioned Kitora Kofun and Takamatsuzuka Kofun not only a golden sun but also a silver moon is depicted. Inside the moon, a rabbit and a toad may have been depicted, similar to decorated tombs in China and Koguryŏ (Aihara 2022: 14; Tamura 2008: 7). At the ceiling of both tombs golden dots have been applied, representing a map of the stars. Circular pieces of gold leaf have been applied and were connected with red lines to form star constellations. The golden dots represent Chinese constellations with the north celestial pole in the centre, surrounded by the Purple Forbidden Enclosure with the Twenty-eight Mansions (Aihara 2022: 13).

At the ceiling of the Ōzuka Kofun, approximately 200 yellow dots were drawn on a red background. Two types of dots have been identified: Dots with a diameter of five to six centimetres and dots with five to six millimetres. Despite the absence of connecting lines, it is presumed that the dots also represent a star map, as their distribution shows numerical similarity to the sixth-century Jinpa-ri Tomb No. 4 in Koguryŏ, although no coordinate system or constellations can be identified (Hirai 2018: 70–78; Yanagisawa 2004: 70–71).



Figure 7: Detail of the right side of the burial chamber from Ōzuka Kofun with quivers containing arrows and solid white circles. Above, a section of the red ceiling with the yellow dots is partially visible. (Modified from Yanagisawa 2004: 61).



Figure 8: Front view of the house-shaped stone coffin from the replica of Chibusan Kofun. (Photograph by Claudia Zancan).

Besides the yellow dots on the ceiling, another possible constellation can be found at the right wall of Ōzuka Kofun. Two rows of red and black quivers with green arrows are depicted on a background consisting of red, yellow, green and black triangles (Figure 7). In the upper row of the quivers, six of the quivers are separated by white circles from another three quivers on the right side. Above the final quiver of the left group is a large white circle, with another circle positioned diagonally above it. Alongside the right side of the quiver, four or five circles that slightly decrease in size from top to bottom are arranged in a slightly curved pattern. Although an interpretation for these circular motifs remains challenging, they are thought to represent stars as well, perhaps the Milk Dipper (Yanagisawa 2004: 60–61, 71).

On the right wall of the house-shaped stone coffin of the Chibusan Kofun in Yamaga (Kumamoto prefecture) from the early sixth century, seven white circles on a red background are shown (Figure 8). Below them a white painted, anthropomorphic figure with raised arms and a crownlike headpiece stands next to a rectangular motif which is divided into four triangles and separated by the figure with a vertical line (Haraguchi 1984: 44–46). Although these circles cannot be interpreted as a certain constellation, they may represent stars as well due to their placement in the upper part of the narrative scene.

Although dots and white solid circles, especially on the ceiling or the upper part of a mural, may represent stars, a uniform interpretation is not possible. Moreover, the distinction between sun and moon is often not possible, partly due to the apparent absence of a standardised circular motif for each celestial body. However, when a large circle is accompanied by dots, the interpretation of a night sky appears more plausible.

Paired Eyes in Decorated Tombs

The rear section of the house-shaped stone coffin of the Chibusan Kofun consists of four stone slabs, although the centre-left slab is missing. On the centre-right stone slab, a continuous diamond motif as well as two concentric circles with two red rings above those have been painted. The concentric circles are painted in red, white and blue from the outside inwards. According to Haraguchi, these circles represent female breasts, based on a belief in a milk deity (Haraguchi 1984:46).[5] However, there is no evidence to support this belief already existed in Kofun period Japan. Another possible interpretation would be that these concentric circles resemble wide open eyes, which are watching over the deceased. It remains uncertain, however, what the two circles above these possible eyes may represent.

In the Torazuka Kofun in Hitachinaka (Ibaraki prefecture) from the beginning of the seventh century, two red rings of almost identical size are shown next to each other on the rear wall of the burial chamber. It appears that the circles were incised using a compass and subsequently painted (Ikeda 2009: 7). Despite the absence of pupils and the fact that the accompanied motifs such as triangles, swords, spears, quivers and guards are not associated with eyes, these two circular motifs may resemble eyes as well. They appear as wide-open eyes and may have been painted together with the other apotropaic motifs, protecting the tomb and the deceased (Tatsumi 1992: 74).

Entering the burial chamber of the Torazuka Kofun or the Chibusan Kofun, the large circular motifs placed side by side are one of the first things that will be seen. It is possible that these ‘eyes’ were intended to act as a protection against potential tomb robbers or other evil forces. When the tomb is

[5] The name ‘Chibusan’ is thought to derive from ‘chibusa-san’ (breast or udder). The image on the rear wall was venerated as a milk deity, attracting women and dairy farmers praying for lactation until the 1970s (Hashimoto 1999: 373).

entered with dim light and the intruders were confronted by the sight of large eyes, gazing at them from the darkness, they might flee in fear. Moreover, when the eyes were not staring at intruders, they were able to keep a close watch on the deceased.

Apotropaic Symbolism of the Circle

Circular motifs often occur with other circles or triangles, which might indicate that the circular motifs themselves held such a large significance, that further motifs were not considered necessary. In the Hinooka Kofun in Ukiha (Fukuoka prefecture), dating to the early sixth century, six large concentric circles in red, white and green have been painted on the rear wall of the burial chamber (Figure 9). They are surrounded by triangles and *warabitemon* (fern-like) motifs (Hasabe: 38–39). Around the main motif and on the side walls, smaller, concentric circles in red have been applied, accompanied by additional triangles, *warabitemon* and quivers. These circular motifs do not resemble eyes, nor can they be identified as celestial bodies or mirrors. It appears that the circular motifs themselves were believed to possess some kind of magical powers. Therefore, the origin of this belief must be evaluated.

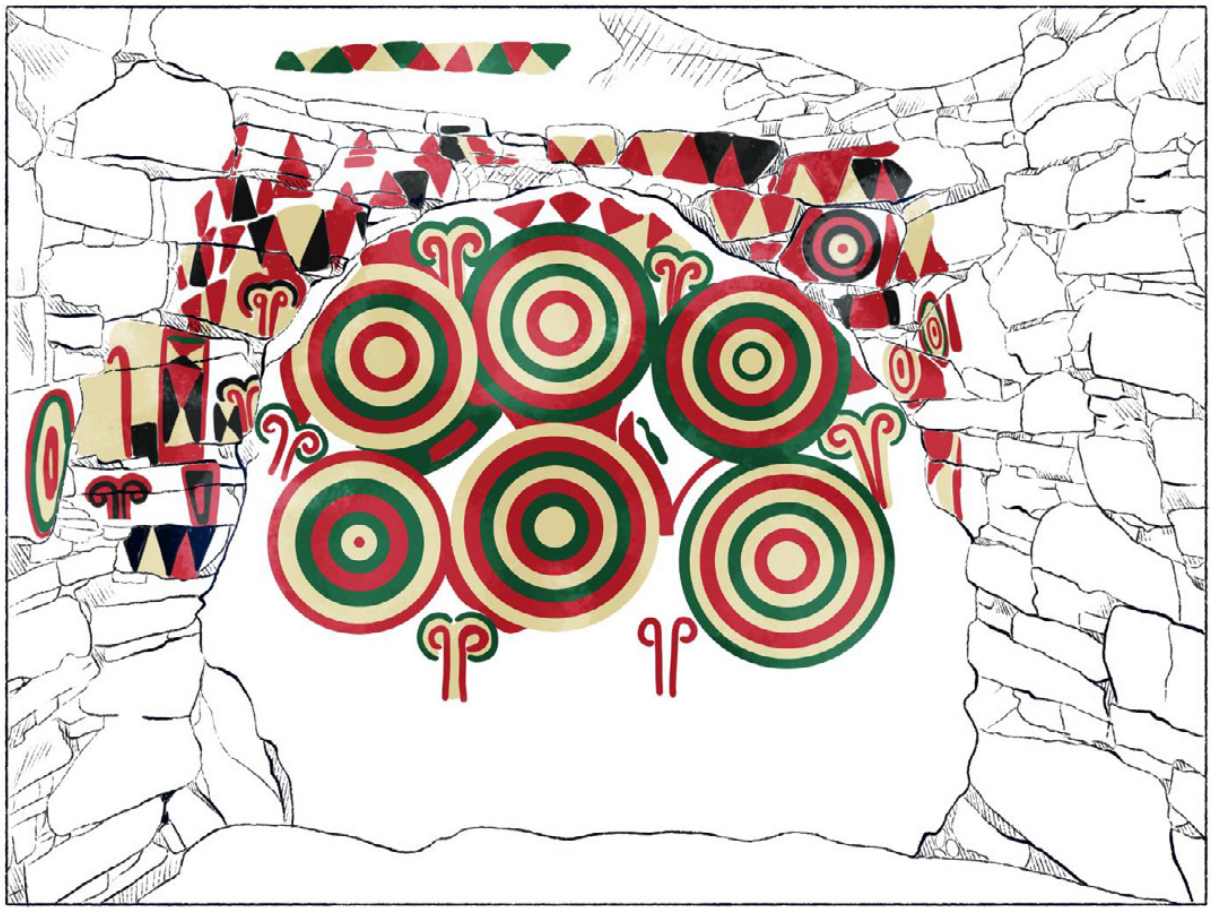

Figure 9: Rear wall of Hinooka Kofun. (Redrawn by Luise Kühnemund from Yanagisawa 2022: 92).

Round bronze mirrors have been used as ritual objects since the Late Yayoi period and were also seen as valuable prestige objects in the Early Kofun period. With the beginning of the Middle Kofun period,

the significance of mirrors as prestige objects declined sharply. However, the production of bronze mirrors was continued until the early to mid-sixth century and bronze mirrors were continuously used as burial objects even in the latest decorated *kofun* from the early eighth century such as the Takamatsuzuka Kofun (Aihara 2022: 11; Katō 2020: 164–165; Kobayashi 1965: 118–119; Kurumazaki 2002: 39–41). Mirrors have been used as apotropaic objects in the burials, perhaps due to their reflective qualities to ward off evil (Augé 2022: 110–112). Moreover, the round mirrors may have been associated with the sun (Ōgata 2009: 26). Sun, moon and stars are also perceived as round objects on the sky, providing illumination and orientation. Therefore, it may be no coincidence that circles of all shapes, were attributed significance as apotropaic symbols.

The narrative scenes excluded, it may not have been of significance what the circular motif represented because a strong apotropaic power was embedded within the circle itself. Circular motifs may have been deliberately used as polysemantic symbols, which included the magical and apotropaic characteristics of the bronze mirrors, celestial bodies and all-seeing eyes. This is evidenced by the usage of circular motifs primarily at the rear wall of the burial chamber—therefore close to the body—as well as their placement at the entrance of the tombs. While evil forces were warded off by the apotropaic magic of the circular motifs, earthly dangers may have been warded off as well because of the visual perception of being stared at from the darkness of a tomb.



Figure 10: House shaped *haniwa* with circles from the tomb SZ09 from the Jōkanzuka kofun cluster in Kashima (Kumamoto prefecture). The circles display two lines extend upwards from the upper edge of the circle. Although the lower part is missing and has been reconstructed, the circles show similarities to those on the fence-shaped *haniwa*, which supports the reconstruction's accuracy. (Hashiguchi 2024: PL–2)

A similar apotropaic usage of circles may also be seen on a house-shaped *haniwa* and a fence-shaped *haniwa* (Figure 10) from the early fifth century tomb with the preliminary name SZ09 from the Jōkanzuka *kofun* cluster in Kashima (Kumamoto prefecture). At the front of the house two openings can be seen, which are flanked by concentric circles (Hashiguchi 2024: 110). Three of the concentric circles show a line which is extending upwards, showing similarities to the mirror depictions on the stone slabs of the almost contemporaneous Nagasako Kofun and Ōtobana-minami Kofun. Three of the probably originally five concentric circles of the fence-shaped *haniwa* are still visible. However, these circles do not show lines going upwards (Hashiguchi 2024: 115). The circular motifs on these *haniwa* may represent mirrors which have been applied to ward off evil forces from entering the house—similar to the usage in burials.

On the other hand, circles on the ceiling of the burial chambers may represent celestial bodies. Since the visitor of a tomb may not look up to the ceiling it can be assumed that they were applied there, so that the deceased can look up into the sun or the night sky. It is possible that this application of circular motifs was used to soothe the soul of the deceased and therefore also protect the bereaved people from an angered soul.

Conclusion

Circular motifs are found in a quarter of the decorated tombs on the Japanese archipelago. The predominance of red circles indicates a close association between circular motifs and the colour red. This may be rooted in the continuous use of this colour for its apotropaic powers. Circles, on the other hand, are polysemantic symbols with apotropaic properties and were deliberately chosen for their ambiguous characteristics. Circular depictions of realistic objects are connected with apotropaic symbolism and include representations of mirrors, celestial bodies such as sun, moon and stars, or all-seeing eyes. Thus, the prominent combination of polysemantic circles and the red colour indicates that red circles may have been regarded as the strongest apotropaic symbols in the imagery of decorated tombs.

The application of circular motifs on the rear wall of the burial chamber as well as on other walls of the burial chamber and the entrance of the tomb also indicates that the circles were thought to contain apotropaic powers. These powers, however, were not limited to the worldly realm but also worked in a magical way in the spiritual realm.

However, this interpretation applies primarily for northern Kyushu, the centre of the distribution of decorated *kofun*. Despite already being limited, local beliefs such as solar boat-motifs or the application of circles on the entrance of a tomb can be observed. In other regions of the Japanese archipelago, especially in the Kanto, Shikoku and Chugoku regions, circular motifs appear to be of minor importance. This may also be attributed to the application technique, since the decorated tombs in these regions exhibit a higher ratio of petroglyphs.

In conclusion, circular motifs appear to be important apotropaic symbols in the beliefs of the Kofun people in northern Kyushu during the fifth and sixth century. Although some of the decorated tombs in this region display continental influences from China and Koguryŏ, the significance of circles originates in the local beliefs of the Japanese archipelago. This importance may derive from their association with other apotropaic objects, including the round bronze mirrors, celestial bodies, and the long tradition of using red colour to protect the burials and the living alike.

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CHAPTER 6

READING THE HORSE: EQUESTRIAN ICONOGRAPHY, FUNERARY SPACE, AND REGIONAL MEANING IN DECORATED TOMBS

CLAUDIA ZANCAN[1]

This chapter examines the iconography of equestrian depictions in the mural and rock-cut decorated tombs (sōshoku kofun) *of the Japanese archipelago, dating from the sixth to the mid-seventh century. Based on a corpus of 69 iconographies identified across 38 tombs, it proposes a new, more precise taxonomy—including simple horse, horse rider, hunter, horse-on-boat, and groom—and reassesses a number of attributions found in previous scholarship through systematic iconographic analysis. The study employs a mixed quantitative and qualitative method, examining the arrangement of equestrian imagery on specific architectural elements and its relationship with other iconographies present in the same funerary context. The analysis demonstrates that the corpus is more varied, both taxonomically and stylistically, than previously recognised. Regional variation in the rendering of the horse is clearly detectable across the archipelago, situated within a broadly shared iconographic language that nonetheless presents distinctive stylistic features across different regions. The distribution of specific taxonomic categories is itself regionally differentiated, pointing to the existence of distinct local traditions within a common funerary repertoire. Contrary to previous scholarship, the evidence does not support an absolute association between equestrian imagery and post-mortem belief: a close evaluation of placement and iconographic arrangement reveals that the meaning of these depictions varied considerably depending on context, with some cases suggesting a closer connection to representations of earthly life or ritual activity than to afterlife symbolism.*

Keywords: *Kofun Period, Decorated Tombs, Horse Culture, Funerary Art, Iconographic Analysis*

馬を読み解く：装飾古墳における馬の図像学・葬祭空間・地域的意味

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本章では、日本列島において 6 世紀から 7 世紀中葉にかけて造営された壁画系および横穴系の装飾古墳における馬の図像表現を考察する。38 基の古墳から確認された 69 例の図像資料を分析対象とし、「単独馬」「騎馬人物」「狩猟場面」「舟上の馬」「馬丁」といった、従来以上に精緻な新たな類型分類を提示するとともに、体系的な図像学的分析を通じて、先行研究における複数の帰属解釈を再検討した。本研究では数量的・定性的手法を組み合わせ、特定の構造的空間的コンテクストのなかでの馬の図像の配置と、同一の葬祭空間内に共存する他の図像との関係性を精査した。分析の結果、本資料群は、類型的にも様式的にも、これまで認識されていた以上に多様であることが明らかとなった。馬の表現における地域的差異は列島全体にわたって明確に認められ、広く共有された図像言語の枠組みの中にありながらも、各地域において独自の様式的特徴が存在していることが示された。特定の類型カテゴリーの分布

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もまた地域的差異を示しており、共通の葬祭レパートリーの中に、地域的伝統が並立していた可能性が指摘できる。先行研究とは異なり、馬の図像と死後の世界に関する信仰との間に絶対的な連関を認めることは、本資料から得られた証拠によって追認することができなかった。配置や図像構成を精細に検討すると、これらの表現が持つ意味は文脈によって大きく異なっており、来世の象徴性よりも、現世の生活や祭祀的活動の表現との関連性が強い事例が存在することを確認した。

キーワード：古墳時代、装飾古墳、馬の図像表現、葬祭文脈、図像学的分析

Introduction

This chapter explores the iconography of horse depictions and related equestrian motifs—such as horse riders, grooms, horses on boats, and hunters—found in mural and rock-cut *sōshoku kofun* (decorated tombs) dating from the sixth to the mid-seventh century across the Japanese archipelago. The corpus comprises 69 iconographies identified within 38 tombs.[2] The aims of this chapter are threefold: first, to establish a new, more precise taxonomy of equestrian iconography, revising a number of attributions found in previous scholarship on the basis of a systematic iconographic analysis; second, to discuss similarities and differences in style and iconographic choices from a regional perspective; third, to investigate the role of these depictions within the funerary space of the decorated tomb, and to reassess the interpretations previously proposed in the light of new evidence. To address these aims, a mixed method—quantitative and qualitative—was employed, combining iconographic analysis with an examination of the arrangement of this imagery on specific architectural elements and its relationship with other iconographies present in the same funerary context.

The chapter begins by reviewing existing scholarship on *sōshoku kofun* to identify research gaps and establish an innovative framework. It then outlines the research methodology, presenting the corpus, the new taxonomy, and the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted. Each equestrian iconography is subsequently analysed through key examples, with attention to regional variation in style and distribution. Finally, the chapter synthesises the database findings to investigate the reasons for the presence of equestrian imagery in the specific context of the Japanese decorated tombs, proposing that its meaning varied across regions and funerary contexts rather than reflecting a single, uniform funerary conception.

Previous Scholarship and Interpretations about Horse Iconography

Horse iconography entered the repertoire of mural and rock-cut decorated tombs from the sixth century until the late seventh century, alongside other iconographies belonging to the so-called 'figurative' group, such as the human figure, other faunal elements, and boats (Kobayashi 1964; Mori 1972; Saitō 1973; Otomasu 1974; Kawano 2023). Previous scholarship is divided into two main interpretations about why equestrian imagery is depicted in *sōshoku kofun*. The first one is connected to the afterlife vision suggesting that the horse—like the boat—served as a vehicle for the deceased or their soul, a reading that finds particular support in cases where the horse is rendered on a boat (Saitō 1983: 149, 161; Shiraishi 1999: 83; Tatsumi 2011: 124–128, 309–311; Yanagisawa 2004: 38–9). However, recent studies have argued that the boat is not always linked to the afterlife (Zancan 2023a) and, as this chapter discusses, this specific equestrian depiction is in fact rare and regionally localised. Saitō (1989: 118–120) argues that the depiction of a riderless horse alongside a human figure may be connected to the Koguryŏ murals, where such imagery could convey the notion that the horse awaits its rider—the

[2] The corpus and the taxonomy were compiled in collaboration with Britta Stein (Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany).

deceased—identified by Tatsumi (2011: 126) in the Takehara tomb (Fukuoka prefecture, mid sixth century).[3]

Yanagisawa (2004) further argues that in the Ōzuka Tomb (Fukuoka Prefecture, mid-sixth century) the presence of horses is connected to a procession welcoming the deceased and in other contexts to representations of activities associated with the deceased's life, such as hunting, whether realistic or ritual (Yanagisawa 2022: 71).[4] In a comparative perspective with the Koguryŏ funerary tradition of decorated tombs (see De Benedittis, this volume), which is frequently invoked in the *sōshoku kofun* discourse, horses feature prominently in the contexts highlighted by Yanagisawa. In procession scenes, for instance—identified by Perrin (2016) in nineteen Koguryŏ tombs (Perrin 2016: 93)—the arrangement of participants and horses, uniformly oriented in the same direction, creates an 'illusion of movement' (Yang 2025: 14). This aspect can be connected to the Ōzuka tomb. However, in Koguryŏ tombs the deceased is always present, since the arrangement of the various figures in procession scenes is intended to convey the message that 'the tomb occupant's rule is stable and eternal' (Yang 2025: 15). In the Ōzuka tomb—the only *sōshoku kofun* in which a possible procession scene has so far been identified—not only are the riders and groom rendered at a much smaller scale than the horse (Zancan 2026a), but the depiction of the occupant is also absent altogether, a characteristic feature of Kyushu decorated tombs (Zancan 2026a; Kawano, this volume). Hunting offers another interesting line of interpretation, since horseback hunting was common in Koguryŏ tombs (Perrin 2016; Kim 2020; Yang 2025); however, only one iconography falling under this category has so far been identified in the *sōshoku kofun* corpus discussed here (see following sections).

A further interpretation links horse depictions in the archipelago decorated tombs to the practice of horse sacrifice in Japan (Stein 2022: 115–116), attested on the Korean Peninsula (Nelson 1993: 247; Kim 2025: 142) and across virtually all areas of the archipelago, suggesting that the painted or engraved image served as a substitute for the actual animal (Kidder 1964: 148; Kusaka 1967: 15; Saitō 1973: 153). Saitō (1973) adds a practical dimension to this argument, noting that the stone construction of the funerary chamber would have rendered the physical burial of a horse impossible, making its pictorial reproduction a functional alternative (Saitō 1973: 152). One intriguing find—a horse skull recovered from the Umade decorated tomb (Kumamoto Prefecture, first half of sixth century) (Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 27)—appears to challenge this hypothesis, since it suggests that the burial of horses could indeed have been practised in *sōshoku kofun* (see Stein, this volume). However, this particular tomb displays no figurative motifs on its walls, only geometric ones. Unless other iconographies have been lost to pigment deterioration, it is not possible to determine whether horse depiction and horse burial could have coexisted.

The horse-on-boat motif has been interpreted by Kidder (1964: 148) not necessarily in relation to afterlife beliefs, but as a depiction of the physical transportation of horses to serve the needs of the ruling class. A markedly different position is taken by Kōmoto (1998), who situates the appearance of horse iconography in decorated tombs within the broader context of historical relations between Kyushu and the Korean Peninsula. Kōmoto hypothesises that the individuals buried in these tombs may have belonged to a group dispatched to Korea in the late 550s, around the time of the fall of the Kaya confederation, and that this group introduced both a new funerary ritual and the image of the horse as a psychopomp to the region (Kōmoto 1998: 29). The disappearance of horse iconography from the decorative repertoire is consequently attributed to the interruption of these peninsular contacts

[3] A similar image as the one described by Saitō is visible in the Sayan (hunting) tomb in Hwado-ri (Perrin 2016: 91).
[4] Yanagisawa (2022: 71) identifies five compositional types of the horse iconography: 1. horse alone; 2. an unmounted horse led by an attendant; 3. a mounted figure drawing a bow; 4. a mounted figure performing no specific action; 5. and a horse on a boat. Yanagisawa interprets the third type as a depiction of a hunting ritual, whereas the remaining types are understood as representations of a vehicle carrying the deceased's soul to the afterlife.

(Kōmoto 1998: 30). However, the corpus assembled for this study demonstrates that horse iconography persisted until at least the mid-seventh century, which calls this theory into question.

Corpus and Stylistic Features of the Horse Iconography

Corpus

The corpus includes 69 iconographies of equestrian imagery found in 38 tombs across 12 prefectures (Figure 1),[5] drawn from a total of 86 iconographies recorded in existing *sōshoku kofun* databases. The discrepancy between these figures reflects a series of deliberate methodological choices, which this section sets out to explain.

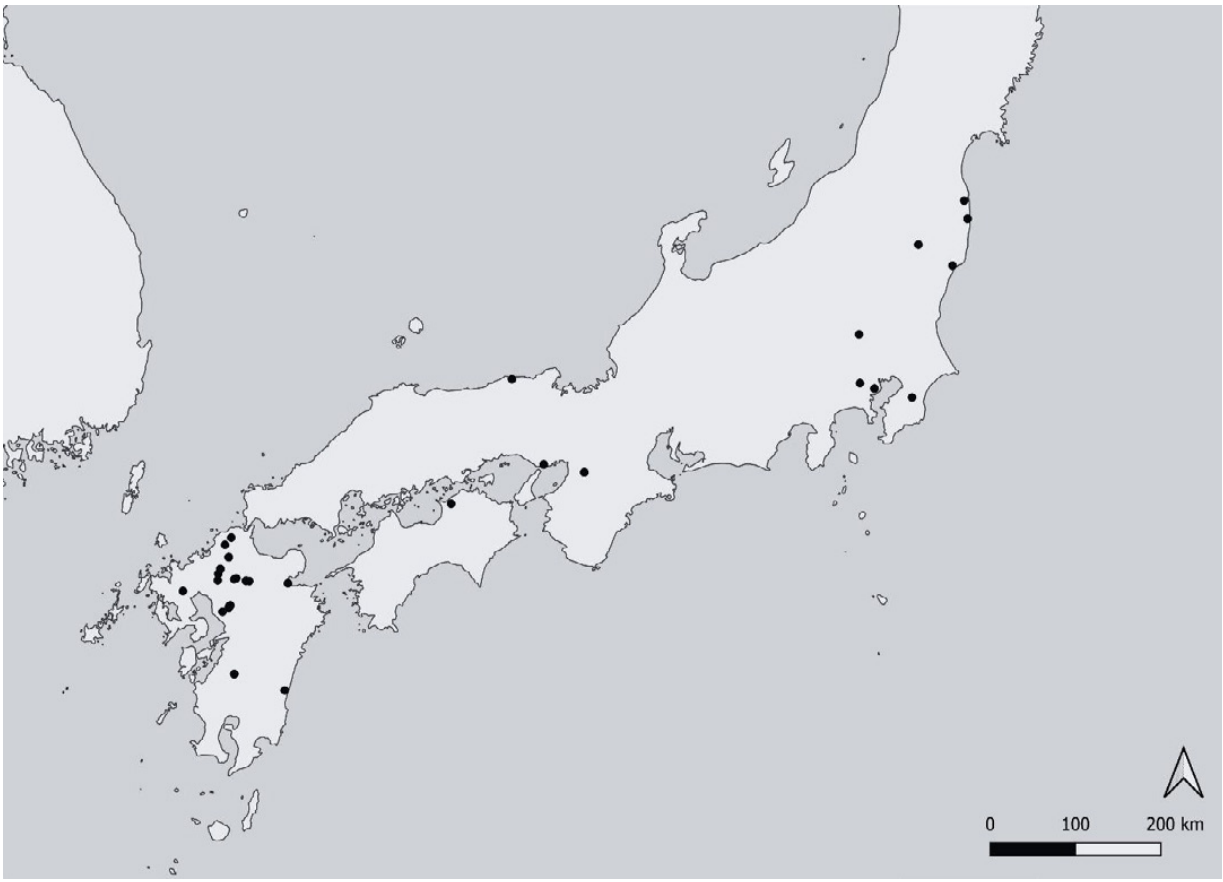

Figure 1: Locations of the decorated tombs discussed in the corpus. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 30.4).

The corpus was compiled on the basis of information drawn from published databases—*Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai (1984), Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai (2002), Fukuoka-ken Kyōiku Iinkai (2025), Sakaguchi and Murakami (2025)*—and supplemented by personal direct archaeological investigation in 2023-2024 of several tombs. Only those representations for which visual material—such as photographs, reproductions and replicas—could be obtained were included in the analysis. An iconographic analysis informed by stylistic and cognitive principles and regional reproductive conventions was further

[5] Distribution of the tombs: Fukuoka (8), Kumamoto (7), Fukushima (5), Oita (4), Osaka (4), Kanagawa (2), Saga (2), Hyogo (2), Chiba (1), Kagawa (1), Miyazaki (1), Saitama (1). Distribution of iconographies per Prefecture: Kumamoto (16), Fukuoka (14), Fukushima (9), Osaka (8), Kanagawa (6), Oita (6), Miyazaki (3), Saga (2), Hyogo (2), Chiba (1), Kagawa (1), Saitama (1)

conducted to verify whether the designations recorded in the databases accurately correspond to what is actually depicted. On these grounds, 18 tombs recorded in previous databases were excluded from the corpus: ten due to the absence of visual material, five because their identification was considered incorrect, and three because the style of depiction suggests the imagery (or engravings) dates to a later period.[6]

Two significant methodological challenges must nonetheless be acknowledged. First, in the case of painted tombs, pigment deterioration may severely obscure—or entirely efface—the original imagery, while in engraved tombs additional lines or figures may have been superimposed onto the primary images at a later stage (see Loftus, this volume). Second, a considerable number of the images in the corpus are not direct photographs of the tomb walls but rather reproductions which might differ from the original.

Taxonomy

Table 1: Summary of the equestrian iconography identified in the corpus, both certain and uncertain. (Source: the author).

Taxonomy	Description	N. of iconographies
Horse	Simple horse	41
Horse rider	Human figure riding the horse	18
Hunter	Human figure with a bow in an explicit scene of hunting	1
Horse-on-boat	Horse on a boat	5
Groom	Human figure interacting with a horse	4

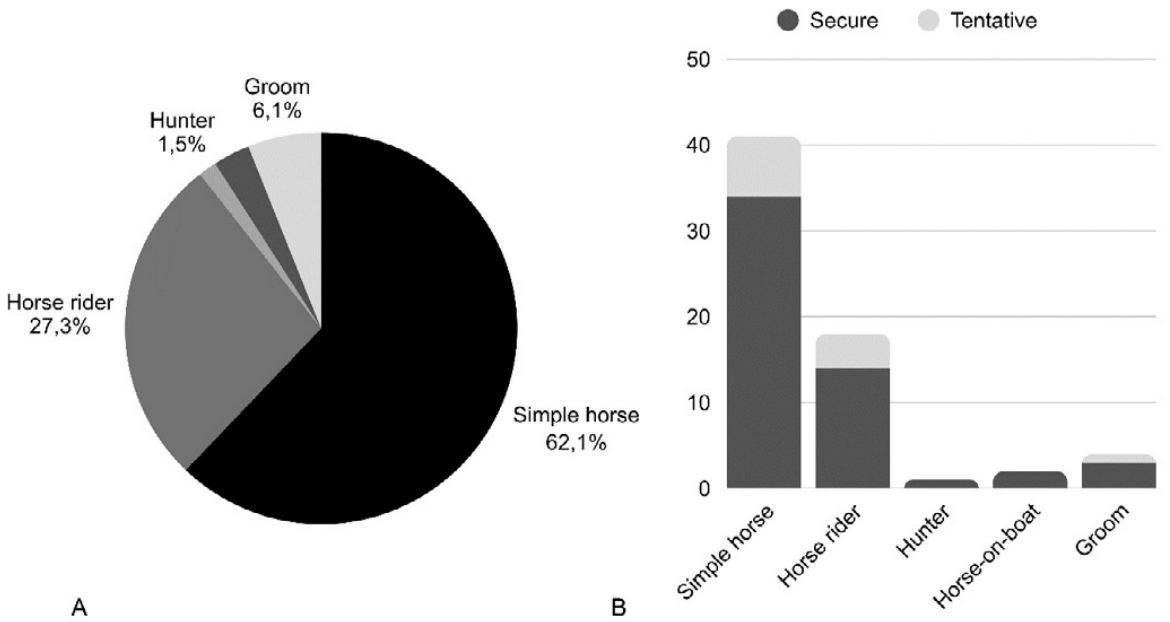

Figure 2: Iconographical analysis of the corpus: (A) pie chart illustrating the percentage distribution of each iconography; (B) bar chart showing the breakdown of iconographies categorised by certainty of identification. (Source: the author).

[6] The analysis includes the recently discovered Kiyotosaku No. 2 tomb, which has therefore not yet been entered into the official databases.

Based on the iconographic analysis of the corpus and a comparative investigation of equestrian imagery in the Kofun period (see Stein, this volume), this study proposes a more detailed taxonomy than those offered by previous scholarship, as set out in Table 1 and discussed in the following section. Where the identification of an iconography as equestrian could not be established with full certainty, a question mark has been appended to the relevant category, indicating that the attribution remains tentative (Figure 2).

The corpus was further examined with regard to the presence/absence of horse gear and a saddle alongside the horse (nine) as well as the possible inclusion of a mudguard (two), the length of the tail (11 not long: 15 not visible), and the presence of a visible mane—variables that, as discussed below, prove relevant to both regional and chronological patterns of distribution.

Horse iconography main characteristics

The horse has been rendered in relief (nine), engraved (24), or painted (36) (usually in red or black).

The horse iconography is recognisable by several distinctive characteristics: an elongated muzzle that tapers slightly downward and is lightly squared at the tip, four visible legs, a short tail (indicating that it was docked, that is raised or held straight), and a slight curve at the head to indicate the mane. All these elements can be identified in horse-shaped *haniwa* clay figurines, and a comparison of the two types of representation reveals precisely the same characteristics (Figure 3) showing that was the horse image that was perceived as such by the Kofun people. This correspondence with *haniwa* is most clearly visible in painted and relief horses, whereas engraved examples tend to be more stylised, with only a few lines used to render the body and the tail—which is often longer than in painted and relief counterparts. Geographically speaking, the realisation style employed for the representation of the horse does not differ in the different areas. Exceptions are discussed in the following sub-sections.

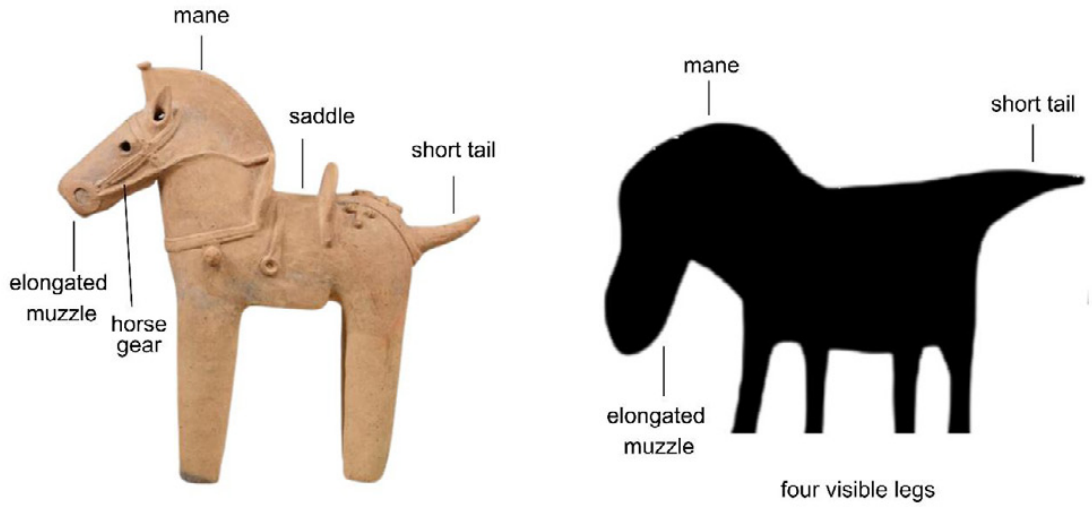

Figure 3: Shared iconographic features in horse representations: a horse-shaped *haniwa* figurine (left) (after ColBase https://colbase.nich.go.jp); and a decorated tomb example (right) (redrawn by author after Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 383).

Equestrian Imagery in Decorated Tombs

Simple Horse

The simple horse—defined here as the animal depicted without any interaction with human figures or other elements—accounts for more than half of the corpus (41; 34 secure and 7 uncertain), of which 15 are painted, 17 engraved, and 9 in relief. This iconography is widespread across the archipelago, with the main concentration on the island of Kyushu, reflecting the general concentration of *sōshoku kofun* in that region (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Locations of 'horse' iconography discussed in the corpus. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 30.4).

In mural tombs, 14 examples from this iconography have been identified, placed for approximately half of the total number on the rear wall of the burial chamber. In rock-cut tombs, horses appear without any direct interaction with other figures, yet alongside further iconographies such as weapons, boats, and human figures, generally positioned around the entrance to the tomb on the external façade. A particularly noteworthy case is the façade of the Ōmura No. 7 rock-cut tomb (Kumamoto Prefecture, sixth-seventh centuries), where several horses are portrayed and it is possible to identify what appears to be a smaller animal—perhaps a foal—within the group, as well as one of the rare examples of a saddle (Figure 5). Scholars have proposed that these external figures may have served an apotropaic function (Kusaka 1967; Fujii and Ishiyama 1979). Engraved examples are found predominantly inside the burial chamber, on both the rear wall (nine) and the side walls (six). The prevalence of this iconography's placement on external façades and on the rear wall of the burial chamber—both elements immediately

visible upon approaching or entering the tomb, requiring no lateral movement—may suggest that a high degree of visibility was intentionally sought. This is further consistent with the familiarity that this iconography would have conveyed, given its close correspondence with horse-shaped *haniwa* figurines and their established presence in the funerary context, suggesting that the simple horse functioned as a widely recognisable element rather than one directly tied to aspects of the deceased's life. Generally speaking, in terms of style, the simple horse is rendered both painted and in relief following the description given in the previous section, that is, in a manner similar to the coeval horse-shaped *haniwa* (Figure 2). This stylistic choice is visible in painted horses in both southern Japan and northern Honshu, echoing possible cultural contacts or migration from Kyushu to the northern prefectures (see Sakaguchi and Inada, this volume).

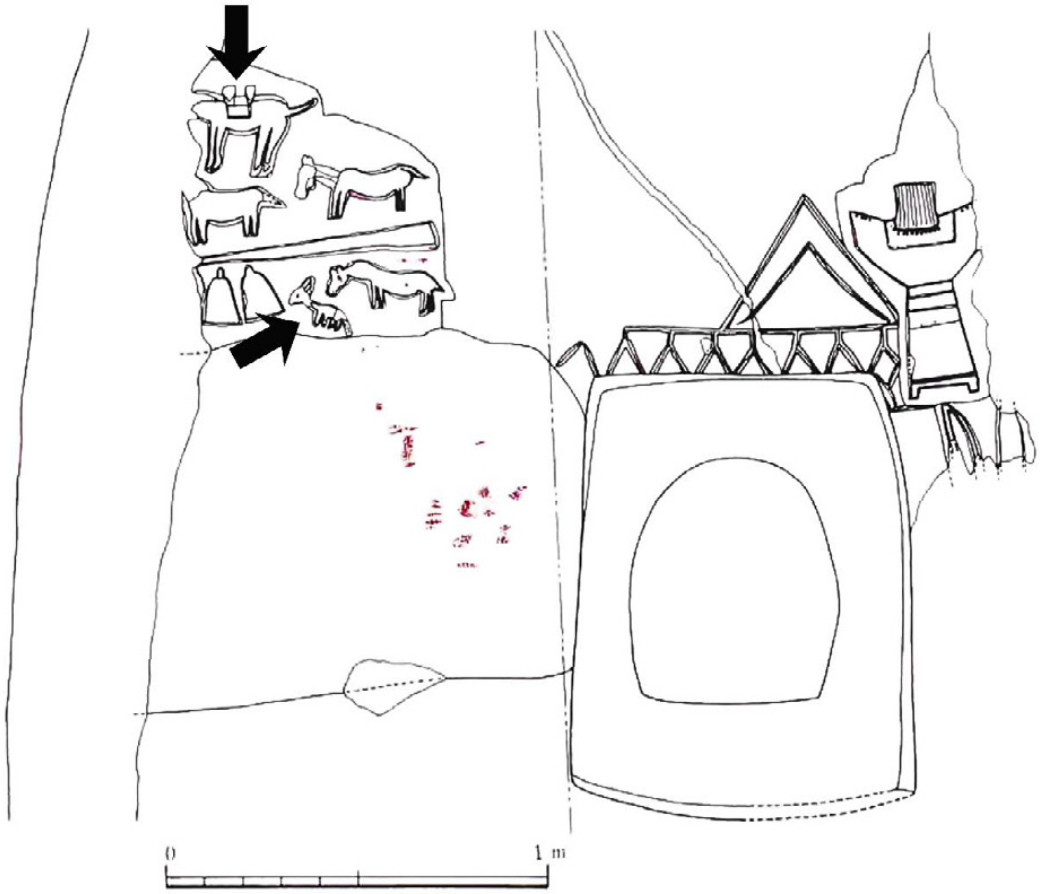

Figure 5: Horses in relief on the external façade of the Ōmura rock-cut tomb (Kumamoto Prefecture), with a possible foal and a rare depiction of a saddle. (After Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 350).

A possible regional style may be identified in the engraved horses of Kanagawa and Saitama Prefectures. In the Hayano tomb (Kanagawa Prefecture, mid-seventh century), the horses—though highly stylised—are rendered with a notably thick long tail and mane (Figure 6B), a feature that distinguishes them from painted examples elsewhere in the corpus. A comparable degree of stylisation, combined with an unusually high level of detail, characterises the horse depicted in the Jizōzuka tomb (Saitama Prefecture, second half of the seventh century), where the animal is rendered with a defined eye and pupil as well as a highly detailed mane. If the dating of these tombs is correct, the two sites are not located far apart, raising the possibility of a shared regional style, particularly given that these territories did not correspond to today's separate prefectures.

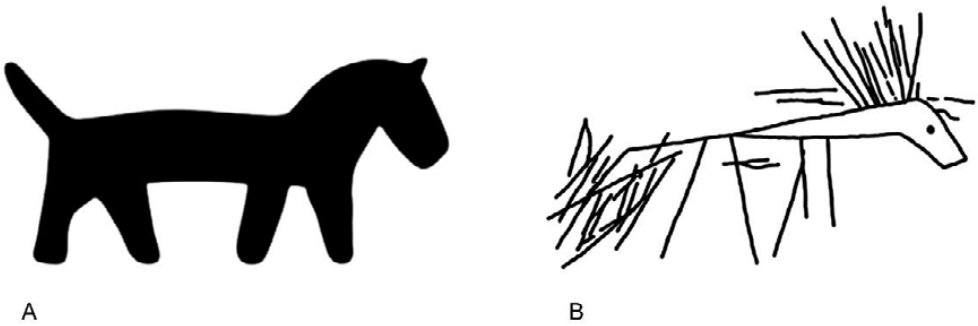

Figure 6: Examples of horse iconography: (A) horse painted in Kyushu style; (B) incised horse from the Hayano tomb; not to the same scale. (Redrawn by the author after personal photograph and after Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 541, respectively).

Horse Riders

Although the simple horse accounts for the majority of the corpus, a significant portion of the examples feature a human figure riding the horse (18; 14 secure and 4 tentative).[7] Compared to the simple horse iconography, the horse rider is concentrated in Kyushu (Figure 7), with the only exceptions found in a few tombs in Fukushima Prefecture (Kiyotosaku No. 1 and No. 2, Izumizaki No. 4, seventh c. and end of the sixth c.) and at the Takaida rock-cut tombs group (Osaka).

One important point that differentiates this category from previous scholarship on horse riders is that accurate iconographic analysis has shown that, in some depictions previously identified as horse riders—such as Gorōyama (three iconographies), Seto 14 (two iconographies), San'notani 2 (one), and Takaida Tomb 2-28 (one)—the figures in question may not actually be riding the horse but are more likely positioned behind it. This can be clearly seen in Figure 8, where Figure 8C shows visible legs and has accordingly been categorised in this study as a 'simple horse'. This reassessment is supported by the comparative iconographic analysis carried out by Stein in this volume, which shows that the legs of the horse rider are never visible, as is the case in *haniwa* depicting horse riders. Conversely, in these seven cases the legs are visible, suggesting that this visibility was probably the result of a stylistic convention for perspective rather than evidence of an actual rider.

[7] The iconographies that have been categorised as 'groom' and which also feature a rider on the horse have been included only in the 'groom' category. Ōzuka and Izumizaki were identified among these.



Figure 7: Locations of the 'horse rider' iconography discussed in the corpus. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 30.4).

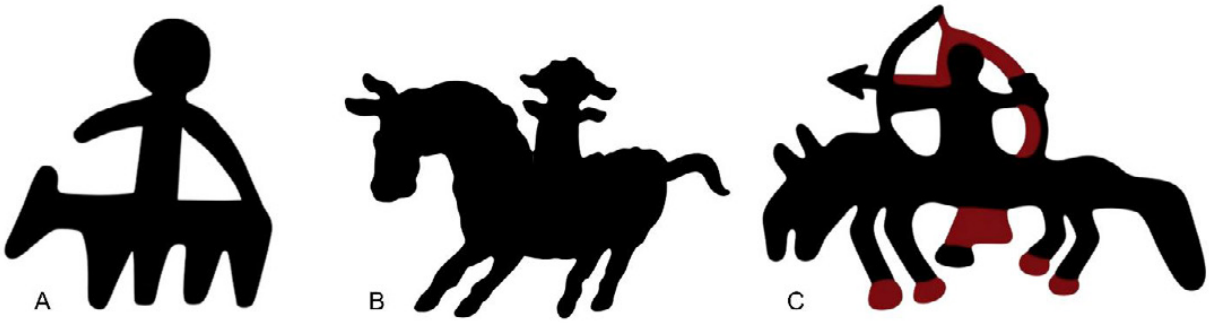

Figure 8: Comparative iconography of the horse rider (A & B) versus the human figure positioned behind the horse (C): (A) Benkei-ga-ana Tomb (Kumamoto Prefecture); (B) Kiyotosaku Tomb No. 1 (Fukushima Prefecture); (C) Gorōyama Tomb (Fukuoka Prefecture); not to the same scale. (Redrawn by the author after: Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 388; Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 612; personal photograph, respectively).

Eight of the remaining depictions also show horse gear: the Ōzuka tomb is the clearest example, where saddles and bridles are well rendered. Bridles are also visible in the Miya-ga-o tomb (Kagawa Prefecture, end of sixth century) and likely also in Kiyotosaku (Fukushima Prefecture). Furthermore, in Miya-ga-o and Takaida Tomb 2-3, not only is the bridle visible but possibly also a mudguard (Figure 9A).

In four tombs, an additional element is depicted resembling a flag (Figure 9B), an element also found on horse-shaped *haniwa*. This motif of a horse bearing a long flag on its back is also found in decorated tombs of the Koguryŏ tradition in battle scenes, such as in Tonggu Tomb No. 12, raising the question of whether the riders depicted here might similarly be warriors.

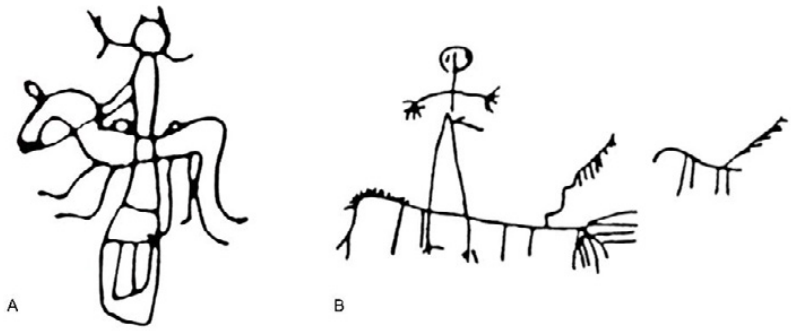

Figure 9: (A) Detail of mudguard of an incised figure of a horse rider from the Takaida 2-3 Tomb (Osaka Prefecture); (B) detail of flags on horses from Takaida 2-28 Tomb; not to the same scale. (Redrawn by the author after Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 484 and 492).

Two main features of the rider in general can be identified (Figure 8A & B): first, a highly stylised human figure (Figure 8A), stripped of identifying markers such as those denoting sex, gender, and physical characteristics, which supports previous research (Zancan 2026a, 2026b) arguing that the human figure in the *sōshoku kofun* tradition was anonymous and genderless; second, in some cases the only visible feature is a triangular headdress recalling a helmet or hat (Figure 8B). It is not the aim of this chapter to assess who was depicted, given this highly stylised manner of representation and the lack of other elements with which to determine the role of the human figure. From the analysis of the context and arrangement of these figures, the only case in which weapons are depicted among the human figures is the Gorōyama tomb. It is nonetheless true that social role can be determined by other means in prehistoric stylised depictions (Zancan 2026b); the presence of the flag motif, in particular, may constitute one such element, even where the human figure itself remains anonymous. The general term 'horse rider' is used here precisely because there is no certainty as to whether those riding the horse are warriors, simple riders, or hold some other role.

More than half of the horse rider depictions are painted (11), while seven are engraved; none is found in relief. The iconography is arranged mainly in composition—that is, in association with other iconographies without an apparent relationship (16)—with only one example each of narrative and isolated arrangements. Notably, no horse rider is depicted on the external façades of the rock-cut tombs, where equestrian imagery is instead represented solely by the simple horse; this distribution is consistent with the argument advanced in the previous section, whereby the simple horse functioned as a widely recognisable, externally visible motif, whereas the horse rider appears confined to the interior of the tomb. The distribution across architectural elements varies considerably according to regional location. In Osaka, horse riders are depicted on the side walls of the corridor (six), whereas in Fukushima they appear on the walls of the burial chamber (four). In Kyushu the distribution varies with no specific trend.

Hunter

Only one single iconography has been identified as depicting a hunter (Figure 10), namely the painted scene in Izumizaki No. 4 (Fukushima Prefecture, end of the sixth century). The composition shows a human figure riding a horse with a bow targeting a deer and is located on the rear wall of the burial chamber as part of a narrative scene.

This depiction is painted in red, arranged on the right side of the rear wall of the burial chamber in a scene composed by different standing human figures, two of whom are wearing long tunics and have raised lateral arms which may recall a ritual scene.

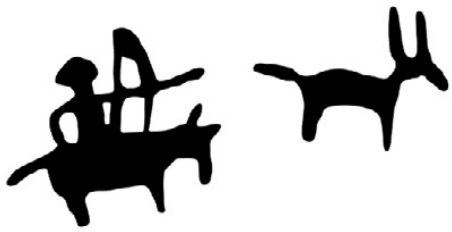

Figure 10: Hunter iconography identified in Izumizaki Tomb. (Redrawn by the author after Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 615).

Horse-on-Boat

This iconographic combination has been attested in only two mural tombs—Haru (Fukuoka Prefecture, second half of the sixth century) and Benkei-ga-ana (Kumamoto Prefecture, second half of the sixth century)—providing five painted examples in total, of which Benkei-ga-ana alone accounts for four. One notable characteristic is that the boat on which the horse appears is of the gondola type (Figure 11), rather than the type composed of two separate elements at prow and stern.



Figure 11: Horse-on-boat iconography identified in Benkei-ga-ana Tomb. (Redrawn by the author after Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 384).

This distinction may reinforce the reading of the horse as a symbol of the soul's passage to the afterlife, particularly since Benkei-ga-ana also features other compositions employing the second boat typology, which is more plausibly associated with the coffin (Wada 2009; Zancan 2023a&b). Tatsumi (2011: 125-126) states that as this latter typology of boat is reproduced on the same wall of the horses on the boat, the horse substitutes for the coffin. The distribution of the iconography within Benkei-ga-ana is also noteworthy: examples appear primarily on the left side wall of the antechamber, with one further instance on the left side wall of the corridor connecting it to the burial chamber, and one on the right-

side wall of the antechamber close to where a corpse was placed on its side. At Haru, the motif is embedded within a narrative scene on the rear wall of the burial chamber. Taken together, these cases point to an iconographic type that, although evocative of broader afterlife beliefs, remains too rare and too geographically concentrated to be treated as evidence of a widely shared funerary conception, and must therefore be considered within the specific ritual and regional context of each tomb.

One further tomb could potentially be added to this category, namely Takehara (Fukuoka Prefecture, second half of the sixth century), whose mural depicts a horse and a boat that appear at first glance to form a single micro-scene—and which, as noted in the introduction, has previously been read by Tatsumi (2011: 126) as depicting the deceased awaiting their mount. However, accurate iconographic analysis shows that the boat is depicted diagonally and at a different orientation to the horse. This iconography has therefore been catalogued here as a 'simple horse'.

Groom

Four iconographies (Figure 12) have been identified as groom (*uma-hiki*): Ōzuka (one secure, Figure 13A), Benkei-ga-ana (one secure, Figure 13B), and Izumizaki No. 4 (one secure, Figure 13C; one tentative). If we consider this iconography to represent a true groom, both the Ōzuka and Izumizaki examples show the figure with an arm extended towards the horse's muzzle. In Benkei-ga-ana, the human figure holds a stick, and the larger animal is surrounded by smaller ones, probably foals, suggesting a horse breeding scene (see Stein, this volume).



Figure 12: Locations of the 'groom' iconography discussed in the corpus. (Map by the author, produced using QGIS 30.4).

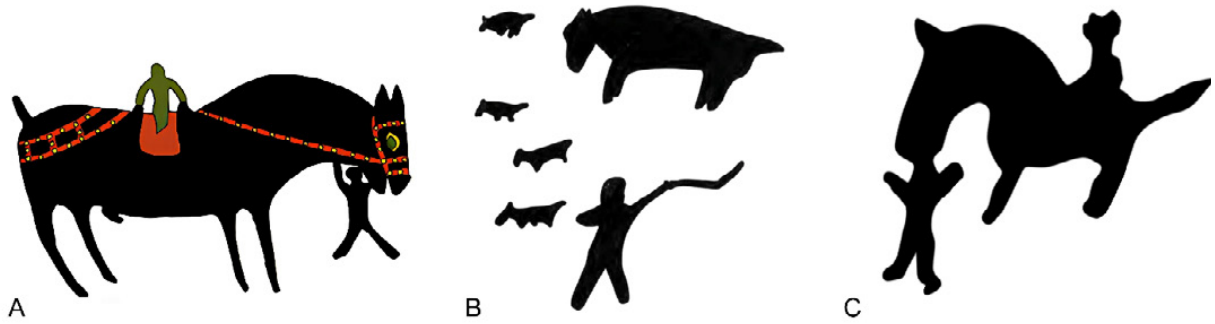

Figure 13: Groom iconographies identified in this research: (A) Ōzuka Tomb (Fukuoka prefecture); (B) Benkei-ga-ana Tomb (Kumamoto Prefecture); (C) Izumizaki Tomb N. 4 (Fukushima Prefecture; not to the same scale. (Redrawn by the author after personal picture; Kumamoto-ken Kyōiku Iinkai 1984: 54; Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 615).

A further, more tentative case worth discussing here, though not included in the count above, since the iconography in question has been catalogued as a simple horse (see Horse-on-boat section), is Takehara. In this mural, the human figure's arms are raised laterally, in the direction of the horse's muzzle. This might represent a groom, or a person involved in the importation of horses from Eurasia. Other elements of the mural's composition and iconographic features, however, suggest that this scene may instead be closely linked to afterlife beliefs. This reading is supported in particular by the possible presence of the animals of the four directions (see De Benedittis and Lázár, this volume)—the turtle and the phoenix—depicted on the entrance gate of the burial chamber, as well as by the horse-like figure at the top of the mural, which can be connected to the legendary dragon-horse Ryūbai (Ōtsuka 2014). This latter figure is, in style and iconographic features, very similar to the iconography depicted in the Ch'ŏnmach'ong tomb (Heavenly Horse Tomb) in the kingdom of Silla: both have their tails pulled upward and a red tongue protruding from their open mouths (Kim 2020: 49).[8] These elements point toward an interpretation more closely linked to afterlife beliefs, although cultural exchanges with the Silla kingdom remain a distinct possibility.

Horse Iconography in Context: Arrangement, Placement, and Meaning

Whereas in other ancient funerary cultures animals have been depicted to recall ritual sacrifice (Frie 2020), to reflect domestic life and innocence, to reflect elite status and protection as in Etruscan tombs (Harrison 2013), or—as in Roman child burials—to evoke play and childhood vivacity (Sorabella 2007), the *sōshoku kofun* case appears more complex, both because of the highly stylised manner of execution and because of the variety of contexts in which equestrian imagery is depicted.

The previous section outlined the main characteristics of each taxonomic category and their geographical distribution. However, one central question remains to be addressed: why is equestrian imagery found in *sōshoku kofun*? A first step towards answering this question is to consider the relationship between horse depictions and other iconographies, and their arrangement within and outside the tomb.

[8] Alternative academic perspectives propose that these figures represent the *qilin* (or *kirin*), mythical chimeras featured in traditional Chinese literature. These celestial beasts are depicted advancing with supernatural speed, breathing heavily as their manes and tails stream behind them (Kim 2020: 49).

One long-standing interpretation holds that the horse functioned as a means of transporting the deceased to the afterlife, and that its presence within the tomb served to symbolise this passage. However, an accurate analysis of the equestrian iconographies has brought to light several difficulties with this interpretation. The first is that the iconography most closely associated with it—the horse-on-boat—is extremely rare and confined to a very restricted area. Furthermore, unlike other equestrian iconographies that find correspondence in the material culture of the period (see Stein, this volume), this specific motif does not. It is true that the left wall of Benkei-ga-ana features several further iconographies evoking afterlife symbolism: the solar boat—that is, a boat bearing a circle representing the sun (see Thierfelder, this volume)—carrying a horse, a boat with a guide-bird (Zancan 2023b), quivers as symbols of protection, and a boat with a rectangular element symbolising a coffin. Yet no further evidence has so far emerged to substantiate this specific association between the horse-on-boat and afterlife symbolism. Shiraishi (1999: 82) further argues that this association is reinforced by the boat type itself, which is semi-structured and suited to ocean navigation. This implies not only that Shiraishi's hypothesis (1999: 73, 85)—whereby the presence of such seagoing vessels attests to a belief, among local populations of the period, in an afterlife situated beyond the ocean and reachable only by sea—may have some validity, but also that a possible transportation of horses, whether as cargo or as participants in funerary rituals, cannot be entirely excluded. Also, the boat seems more a gondola-shaped boat than a vessel. A further element worth considering is that in other well-known tombs in the vicinity of the two containing this iconography—Mezurashizuka and Torifunezuka—the boat in navigation is present, but the horse is not, which further complicates this reading. Finally, a comparison with the Koguryŏ mural tombs—from which some concepts relating to the afterlife are hypothesised to derive—yields no parallel for this specific iconographic combination. Although the possibility of an association between the horse-on-boat and afterlife symbolism cannot be entirely dismissed, the iconographic and material culture evidence as it currently stands is insufficient to support it as a general interpretive framework.

In other decorated funerary and rock-art traditions, figurative motifs have been shown to guide the movement of those entering the tomb through their disposition and directional orientation: in Etruscan tombs, through the positioning and bodily orientation of figures (Roncalli 1990), and in Scandinavian rock art, where the orientation of the animal's muzzle may serve to guide both the viewer's gaze and the overarching narrative flow (Tilley 2021). This directional logic has also been proposed for *sōshoku kofun*: Shiraishi (1999: 82–85) argues that in multi-chamber tombs, the combination and placement of equestrian imagery reinforces the idea of passage, with horses and boats appearing not within the innermost burial chamber—understood as the realm of the dead already reached, and protected by geometric symbols and weapons—but rather on the walls of the antechamber or along the transitional zones leading to it. According to Shiraishi, this demonstrates that the horse and the boat literally symbolised the corridor of the soul's transit from the world of the living to that of the dead. However, this directional logic does not hold consistently in *sōshoku kofun*, at least not for depictions placed at passage points or on side walls. Where the muzzle of horses depicted on the left side walls of both the antechamber and the corridor leading to the burial chamber can be examined, it consistently points towards the exit rather than towards the burial chamber—the opposite of what the afterlife-journey reading would predict. This is a significant point, since these are precisely the depictions that previous scholarship has most often cited as evidence for the horse = afterlife-journey equation. The only exception is the entrance gate to the burial chamber at Ōzuka.

These observations suggest that the afterlife-journey hypothesis, even where it retains some plausibility, should not be extended to the corpus as a whole. Where it does apply—most notably at Benkei-ga-ana and Haru, through the horse-on-boat motif—it appears more convincingly understood as a regionalised expression of a broader and more loosely defined system of afterlife beliefs, one in which the boat, rather than the horse itself, plays the more decisive symbolic role.

The database results, moreover, reveal that regardless of taxonomic category, equestrian iconographies are reproduced primarily on the walls of the burial chamber (36 examples) and, in the case of Kyushu rock-cut tombs, on the external façade (nine examples); the remaining iconographies are more widely dispersed across the corridor, the side walls of the antechamber, and the entrance gates. The 36 examples placed within the burial chamber—and thus in direct connection with the deceased—are drawn from all five categories and are rarely the sole iconography present. Their arrangement with other motifs ranges from compositions evocative of afterlife symbolism (as at Takehara, with the four directional animals) to more dynamic narrative scenes (as at Gorōyama, Kiyotosaku, and Izumizaki) to groupings with other animal figures (as at Dokidahigashi, Figure 14, and Ōzenjihakusan).



Figure 14: Horses and other animals carved on the rear wall of the Dokidahigashi Tomb. (Redrawn by the author after Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 337).

Yet even these murals appear, in one way or another, to be anchored to a concrete life scene rather than to pure symbolism. Even in those tombs most readily associated with afterlife symbolism—Benkei-ga-ana, Haru, and Takehara—elements can be identified that connect this symbolic sphere to some aspect of the deceased's life: the horse-breeding scene at Benkei-ga-ana, the transportation of the horse by boat for purposes other than the afterlife journey at Haru, and the clothing of the human figure at Takehara, which mirrors contemporary dress. In this light, the presence of afterlife-related elements in these tombs should not be read as straightforward confirmation of the horse = afterlife-vehicle hypothesis, but rather as evidence that funerary imagery in *sōshoku kofun* tends to interweave symbolic and daily-life registers, without these being clearly separable.

A further key finding concerns the external façades of Kyushu rock-cut tombs, where only the simple horse is depicted, and exclusively in relief; no other category from the taxonomy appears in this position, whereas in rock-cut tombs elsewhere depictions are confined to the walls of the burial chamber. Rock-cut tombs were used primarily by the common population of local villages (see Sakaguchi, this volume). It is noteworthy that in the Kyushu tombs equestrian imagery—which, it should be recalled, consists solely of the simple horse in relief—appears exclusively on the external façade, whereas in other regions it is found inside the tomb, in a more interactive relationship with other iconographies. Taking into account the hypothesis of an apotropaic function for images on the external façade, it seems plausible that the exterior was intended as a visual statement accessible to all—hence an immediately legible, simple iconography, such as the simple horse with its recognisable *haniwa*-like features—while the interior was reserved for more intimate imagery, accessible only to the deceased and to those permitted to enter: scenes of everyday life, of horses ridden or depicted alone. It is equally noteworthy that the more role-specific iconographies—groom and hunter—and those connected to funerary symbolism—horse-on-boat—are never displayed on the external façade, but are confined to the most intimate spaces of the funerary context: the burial chamber itself, or the zones immediately leading to it.

This consistent grounding in life-related scenes also has a bearing on two further interpretations discussed in the introduction. The hypothesis that horse depictions functioned as a pictorial substitute for horse sacrifice would predict the presence, within the corpus, of imagery directly evocative of sacrificial practice; no such imagery, however, has been identified in the tombs discussed here. Similarly, Kōmoto's (1998) hypothesis connecting the introduction of horse iconography to a specific group with direct ties to the Korean Peninsula would lead us to expect other iconographic elements pointing to this connection; no such elements have emerged from the present analysis. Neither interpretation, therefore, finds direct support in the corpus, although this does not in itself exclude either possibility.

A comparison with Koguryŏ tombs bearing equestrian imagery further highlights how differently this motif is employed in the archipelago. With the exception of Ōzuka—where the disposition of the horses, with their muzzles pointing towards the entrance to the passage leading to the burial chamber, recalls a procession—and of the hunting scene at Izumizaki, the majority of the corpus depicts rather different scenarios: scenes of human figures riding horses in apparent movement, scenes in which horses and human figures are juxtaposed without clear interaction, groupings of different animals together, and scenes featuring human figures bearing weapons whose context remains unclear. On the question of hunting specifically, it is worth noting that, while Izumizaki remains the only example of an explicit mounted hunting scene, an unmounted hunting scene has been identified at Seto 14; on other walls of the same tomb, moreover, human figures bearing bows are positioned close to horses without being mounted on them—comparable, in this respect, to the figures discussed in the Horse Rider section as standing behind, rather than riding, the horse. A further example is the mural at Kiyotosaku No. 76 (Figure 15), where a hunter with a bow targets what appears to be a horned deer, while to the left of the composition a human figure on horseback is visible. Unlike Koguryŏ, where hunting on horseback is depicted explicitly and repeatedly, the Japanese material may thus point to a less direct or less explicit association between hunting and the horse: archers positioned near, but not upon, horses may still evoke a hunting context, even where the mounted hunter type itself remains exceptionally rare. It is worth noting, in this regard, that hunting imagery in the broader Kofun funerary repertoire may carry implications beyond the merely recreational: Harunari (1999: 217–218) has argued that deer hunting on *haniwa* cylinders is consistently associated with elite figures and may symbolise the ritual conquest of territorial rights. Although the contexts differ and a direct equation cannot be assumed, this interpretive possibility adds a further dimension to the hunting scenes identified in the *sōshoku kofun* corpus, suggesting that even where they appear to depict a life-related activity, they may simultaneously encode a statement of status or ritual authority.



Figure 15: Unmounted hunting scene and a horse rider painted on the rear wall of the Kiyotosaku No. 76 Tomb. (Redrawn by the author after Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūkai 2002: 612).

Despite the high degree of stylisation, the horse remains almost always immediately recognisable across the corpus. There are, however, cases in which either the horse or the human figure carries markedly more iconographic detail than its counterpart. In the first instance, this asymmetry is visible at Ōzuka, where the horses are rendered with sexual attributes, eyes, saddle, and bridle, while the human figures are highly stylised and stripped of any sexual, gender, or social markers (Zancan 2026a). In the second instance, the Gorōyama mural shows the reverse: the human figures bear attributes such as headdresses, long tunics, and weapons, while the horses are depicted without any equipment. Indeed, database analysis reveals that only nine horses across the entire corpus are shown with horse gear and a saddle, and that five of these nine occur within a single tomb, Ōzuka. This may suggest that, in most contexts, the horse was not depicted as an animal intended to be ridden. A further, particularly suggestive case is Ōmura Tomb No. 7, where several horses are depicted but only one bears a saddle. According to Saitō (1989: 147-149), the remaining elements depicted alongside the horses may represent ritual bells; given that this element is positioned among the horses, it may be possible to infer that a ritual involving horses is being depicted here.

The question of regional style—raised in the previous section with regard to the engraved horses of Hayano and Jizōzuka (Kanagawa and Saitama Prefectures)—deserves a brief return here. The stylistic correspondence between painted horses in southern Japan and in northern Honshu—such as in Ibaraki and Fukushima Prefectures—suggests a degree of cultural continuity, or migration, along this axis. The possible regional style identified in Kanagawa and Saitama, by contrast, stands somewhat apart from this picture: rather than reflecting contact with Kyushu, it may instead point to a more localised tradition developed independently within a relatively contained area. Whether this reflects a distinct, smaller-scale tradition of horse representation, or simply a later or more peripheral development, remains an open question that would benefit from further comparative work beyond the scope of this chapter. The Takaida rock-cut tomb complex offers a further case in which elements associated with Kyushu may intersect with regionally developed characteristics. It has been proposed that these tombs were constructed by migrants from Kyushu (Yamane 2018), on the basis both of the tomb typology and of the iconographic repertoire and stylistic features of the depictions. However, a close iconographic analysis reveals that the subjects reproduced in these tombs present notable stylistic differences with respect to the Kyushu tradition: all the images are engraved, which means that stylisation is even more pronounced; and, with one exception, all the depictions are found on the walls of the corridor connecting the antechamber to the burial chamber, rather than on the burial chamber itself or on the external façade as in the Kyushu tradition. Notwithstanding this greater degree of stylisation, they also display more detailed elements than the Kyushu iconographies—such as the presence of the flag and

the mudguard. These differences, taken together, suggest that even where a Kyushu origin may be plausible, the equestrian imagery of Takaida developed along its own regional trajectory, and should not be read as a straightforward extension of the Kyushu tradition.

The database and iconographic analysis together demonstrate that, although equestrian imagery is present across the entire archipelago, it appears to carry different meanings depending on the context of its reproduction. When the variables of iconographic arrangement, relationship with other iconographies, and placement on architectural elements are considered together, it seems possible to propose that in the tombs of Kyushu the equestrian imagery is more closely connected to a symbolic and apotropaic dimension—plausibly, though not conclusively, linked to afterlife beliefs—given the positioning of the horse on the external façade, where it becomes part of the visual system surrounding the deceased, alongside the presence of iconographies associated with post-mortem symbolism, such as horse-on-boat and the mural at Takehara. In the decorated tombs of other regions, whether mural or rock-cut, the imagery tends instead towards a narrative of earthly life: episodes and elements that may be connected to the life of the deceased, rituals and to the history of the place.

To return to the premises of this chapter: as Levy (1995: 15) has observed in relation to animal iconography in Bronze Age Scandinavia and Ohio Hopewell, animal symbols in prehistoric societies tend to be inherently multivocal in Turner's (1969) sense, simultaneously incorporating exegetical, positional, and operational meanings that cannot always be disentangled from the archaeological evidence alone. This structural characteristic appears equally applicable to the equestrian imagery of *sōshoku kofun*: the ambiguity of meaning identified across the corpus is therefore not simply a limitation of the evidence but may instead reflect the original complexity of the symbol itself—one that was available for different uses, in different contexts, without losing its core recognisability. Whereas certainty about the meaning of some representations remains out of reach, the fact that the horse was reproduced in so intimate a context as the funerary space, and with broadly consistent characteristics across much of the archipelago, suggests that this animal carried a shared value—whether symbolic and tied to concepts of the afterlife, or more closely connected to the earthly or ritual life of the deceased and their community.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined equestrian iconography in the mural and rock-cut decorated tombs of the Japanese archipelago through a new, more precise taxonomy, proposing a revised classification of 69 iconographies across 38 tombs and reassessing a number of attributions found in previous scholarship. The analysis has shown that the corpus is more varied—both taxonomically and stylistically—than previously recognised, and that regional variation in the rendering of the horse, although operating within a broadly shared iconographic language closely tied to the coeval *haniwa* tradition, is clearly detectable across different areas of the archipelago. This variation is mirrored in the distribution of specific taxonomic categories, which are themselves regionally differentiated, pointing to the existence of distinct local traditions within a common funerary repertoire.

The architectural specificity of the contexts in which equestrian iconographies appear further complicates the picture. Contrary to what previous scholarship has often assumed, the evidence does not support an absolute association between equestrian imagery and post-mortem belief. An attentive evaluation of placement and iconographic arrangement reveals that the meaning of these depictions varied considerably depending on where and how they appear within the funerary space—with some contexts, most notably the rock-cut tombs outside Kyushu, suggesting a closer connection to representations of earthly life or ritual activity than to afterlife symbolism. This ambiguity is not incidental: the horse appears to have carried different meanings in different contexts without losing its fundamental recognisability across the archipelago—and it is precisely this complexity, refracted across regions, taxonomic categories, and funerary spaces, that makes equestrian imagery a particularly rich, if elusive, window onto the world of the late Kofun period.

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CHAPTER 7

RIDING BEYOND DEATH: EQUESTRIAN CULTURE AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN KOFUN PERIOD ICONOGRAPHY

BRITTA STEIN[1]

The introduction of the horse led to profound socio-cultural developments in Kofun period society during the Middle and Late Kofun periods (5th – 6th century CE). In recent years, various aspects of Kofun horse culture have been discussed in great detail in Japanese archaeology. Yet, depictions of horses and riders in decorated tombs and on pottery, as well as rider-shaped and groom-shaped clay statues, and decorated Sue pottery have received very little attention and few advances have been made to incorporate these depictions into the wider research on Kofun period horse culture. It is these depictions however, that show significant regional variation and indicate that the role and importance of the horse in both society and religion differed within Kofun society. This chapter adopts a comparative approach to identify patterns of regional variation in Kofun period horse culture, highlighting differences in iconography, symbolism and funerary assemblages between Northern Kyushu and Kanto. Interregional interactions and centre-periphery relationships during the Kofun period will be analysed. By examining the interplay between material culture, ritual practices, and regional identities, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex socio-cultural dynamics of ancient Japan. Finally, this paper highlights the importance of considering regional variation and local contexts in the interpretation of archaeological data by integrating depictions of horses and riders into the wider discourse on Kofun horse culture, thus shedding light on the diverse cultural landscape of the Kofun period and its implications for broader narratives of Japanese history and archaeology.

Keywords: *Kofun Period, Horse Culture, Funerary Art, Haniwa, Kofun Period Material Culture, Decorated Tombs*

死を越えて駆ける：古墳時代の騎馬文化とその図像学的表現

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古墳時代中期・後期（5〜6 世紀）ににおける、馬の伝来は古墳時代の社会に重大な社会的・文化的発展をもたらした。近年、日本考古学界では、古墳時代の馬文化をめぐる諸相が活発な議論が行われている。しかしながら、装飾古墳に描かれた馬と騎馬の図文、騎馬・馬曳き埴輪、および装飾須恵器の小像については、従来ほとんど注目されることなく、これらの人と馬の関係を表す描写を古墳時代の馬文化の広範な研究に組み込むこともあまり試みられていない。しかし、まさにこれらの描写には顕著な地域差を看取でき、古墳時代の社会における馬の役割と重要性が、社会的・宗教的両面において地域によって異なっていたことを示唆するものである。本章では比較研究のアプローチを採用し、古墳時代の馬文化における地域差のパターンを明らかにすることを目的として、北部九州と関東の間における描写・象徴性・副葬品の組成の差異

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に焦点を当てる。また、古墳時代における地域間交流および中心周辺関係についても検討する。物質文化・祭祀慣行・地域的アイデンティティの相互関係を考察することにより、本稿は古墳時代の日本の複雑な社会的・文化的動態に対する理解に寄与したい。最後に、馬と騎馬の描写を古墳時代の馬文化をめぐるより広い議論に組み込むことで、地域差と地域的文脈を考慮することの重要性を提示し、古墳時代の多様な文化的景観とそれが日本の歴史・日本考古学のより大きな文脈に対してもつ意義を明らかにする。

キーワード：古墳時代、馬文化、葬送美術、埴輪、古墳時代物質文化装飾古墳

Introduction

Over the last 15-20 years research related to Kofun period horses and Kofun period horse culture (馬文化, *uma bunka*) or Kofun period rider culture (騎馬文化, *kiba bunka*) has received considerable attention and research has advanced at a very fast pace. At the same time, this research has shifted from focusing primarily on typo-chronological studies of horse gear excavated from mounded tombs to research that deals with the horse in a more comprehensive manner and incorporates research from a variety of different fields such as zooarchaeology, settlement archaeology and the archaeology of mobility and exchange. This interdisciplinary research is exploring how and why the horse arrived on the Japanese archipelago, how it spread and where pastures were being established for horse breeding, what role the horse had in Kofun period society, and in which way Kofun period horse culture is connected to the horse culture(s) in the Far Eastern and North-Eastern regions of Eurasia (e.g., Isahaya 2023; Isahaya and Mukaide 2023, 2026; Migishima et al. 2019; Momosaki 2023; Sasaki et al. 2021). At the same time, depictions of horses and in particular depictions of human-horse-interactions have received very little attention. In fact, there has not been much iconographical analysis of Kofun period decorated tombs in the last 20 years (Miyahara 2023: 30), and the same can be said about research depictions of human-animal interactions among the *haniwa* clay statues and on decorated Sue pottery (e.g. Nagumo 1993; Sugiyama 1997; Ando 2004).

This chapter will show how integrating the analysis of depictions of human-animal interactions across different media can complement and enhance current research and thus approach the topic from a holistic perspective which offers new insights on Kofun period horse culture by highlighting regional differences as well as mobility networks.

The introduction of the horse was one of the most important events during the Kofun period with far-reaching consequences for Kofun period society and religion. No wild native horses existed on the Japanese archipelago prior to the introduction of horses from the Eurasian mainland (Isahaya 2018: 194-195, 200; Kondō 2021: 2-7; Sasaki 2018: 23). Among the older academic literature, one might find references to Jōmon period horses; however, re-examinations have long since proven them to be much younger disturbances of Jōmon period features (Kondō et al. 1991; Kondō 1993). According to Chinese written sources such as the Wei zhi, no horses existed on the Japanese archipelago in the third century CE (Sahara 2003: 102; Seyock 2004: 42). The archaeological record corroborates this account. A few scattered sites with remains of horses appear in the final Yayoi and Early Kofun periods in the Kinki region and the area of present-day Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures. However, none of those remains are securely dated and it is not until the end of the fourth century that the full-fledged introduction of the horse starts. This is characterised by a sudden large-scale increase in horse burials, but more

importantly is accompanied by riding equipment such as saddles, bridles and stirrups as well as horse-shaped *haniwa* (Isahaya 2021: 36-37, 2024: 187-188). Recent DNA analyses show that the horses on the Japanese archipelago are related to Mongolian horses and that the horse was introduced only once. All existing Japanese horse breeds are descended from Kofun period horses with no additional genetic admixture (Tozaki 2024: 55-73). There can be little doubt that the horse was introduced by boat to the Japanese archipelago. However, the semi-structured boats (also called planked-up dugout canoes), which were in use on the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula at the time, were not seaworthy ships (Kimura 2016: 21; Shibata 2022: 527-528). The ships had to be rowed and the large crew necessary left little space for live animal cargo and one boat could not have transported more than one horse. The weight of that horse would have also caused difficulties for the stability of the boat (Tsukamoto 2021: 130). Transporting horses across the Korean strait was therefore a most difficult and dangerous endeavour during the Kofun period (Matsui and Maruyama 2014: 15; Isahaya 2024: 193). Why then was such a huge effort made to introduce the horse to the Japanese archipelago during the Kofun period?

Military tensions between kingdoms on the Korean peninsula and the introduction of heavily armoured cavalry units (so-called cataphracts) by Koguryŏ are often cited as the reason for the introduction of the horse to Japan (Chiga 2004: 337; Isahaya 2010: 52-55; Shiraishi 2016: 96-102).[2] According to this theory, as mounted combat on horseback and heavy cavalry in particular spread throughout Northeast Asia in the fourth and fifth centuries CE (Shin 2019: 67-71), the Kofun people might have felt the need to keep up with military developments on the Eurasian mainland and were thus incentivised to import the horses needed for mounted combat. However, while some Japanese archaeologists think that the horse served a primarily military purpose (cf. Mori 1993: 28), there is very little evidence for the existence of cavalry on the Japanese archipelago, be it light or heavy cavalry. And while horse armour—as depicted in Koguryŏ tomb murals—has been excavated from 39 sites in South Korea (Kungnip Kyŏngju Munhwajae Yŏn'guso and Kungnip Kyŏngju Pangmulkwan 2020: 58-101), only 4 such sites are currently known from Japan (Isahaya 2020: 166-173). This lack of military equipment for horses mirrors a passage from the dynastic history of the Sui dynasty (Sui shu) compiled in the early seventh century which describes the Kofun people with the following sentence: there are warriors but no wars (Stein 2022: 117).

More recently Isahaya Naoto has pointed out that the spread of the horse across the Japanese archipelago is interconnected with the development of a road network (Isahaya 2019: 15-19, 2021: 46-53, 2024: 198-210, 2025) that connected the various pastures with the central Kinki region to which horses were supplied (Uetsuki 2024: 285-287). Given the difficulties of transporting horses by boat mentioned above, it is not surprising that overland routes would be chosen once the horses reached the Japanese archipelago. The development of a road network thus went hand in hand with the establishment of new pastures for horse breeding in inland areas such as southern Nagano and Gunma (Isahaya 2024: 203-207).

How the Kofun period horse trade was organised is still a matter of debate. Momosaki Yūsuke proposed that horses were imported independently by different local chiefs who established pastures for horse breeding in the respective areas they ruled (Momosaki 1999: 378, 2023: 411-427). However, Isahaya has recently argued that the introduction and subsequent dissemination of the horse was monopolised by the Kinki elites from the very start (Isahaya 2025: 35). As monopolising access to certain prestige goods and securing alliances by the distribution of those goods was the basis of the political and economic dominance of the Kinki elites, it seems quite plausible that at least an attempt to monopolise access to

[2] The northern-most kingdom located in present day Manchuria and North Korea.

horses would have been made to further strengthen their position. However, it is questionable if the Kinki elites were powerful enough to completely monopolise the trade as there is various evidence that chiefs in peripheral regions remained fairly independent until the end of the Kofun period (Sasaki 2017: 75).

As the Kofun people had no prior experience with horses, the first pastures were established and managed by immigrants from the Korean peninsula (Shiraishi 2016: 102). Early horse pastures such as the one in Kawachi (Ōsaka plain) or the Ina valley (southern Nagano) feature immigrant settlements that are characterised by pottery from the Korean peninsula (Fujita 2010: 2-4, Okada 2014: 9) as in Kawachi and/or the presence of hearths and cairns which are both linked to immigrants from the peninsula (Kobayashi 2014: 29). The presence of large amounts of pottery for salt production might also indicate a pasture (Okada 2014: 9). Direct evidence for horse pastures is very rare. A notable exception is the Shiroi site group in present day Gunma prefecture. A volcanic eruption in the 6th century preserved over 40,000 hoof prints in a layer of volcanic ash (Murata 2019: 279-280). It is these hoof prints that allow a reconstruction of the size of Kofun period horses, which is estimated at only 125-135cm (withers height) (Inoue and Sakaguchi 1997: 129). One of the very few fully-preserved horse skeletons, from the Shitomiya-kita site in Kawachi (Ōsaka prefecture), has a withers height of 127cm (Matsui and Maruyama 2014: 16) thus confirming the calculations based on the hoof prints.

The horse itself was an important prestige object in the Kofun period, as was the horse gear which is often richly decorated with gilt bronze (Mochizuki 1991: 250). Over 200 horse burials also indicate that the horse played an important role in Kofun period funerary rites, possibly to transport the soul of the deceased to the afterlife (Chiga 2004: 340-341; Shiraishi 2004: 331-332; Tatsumi 2011: 124-128, 309-311). Finds of horse teeth and hoof prints close to rice paddies and the depiction of a horse with what appears to be a plough have led to the theory that horses were also used as farm animals (Isahaya 2024: 190-192). However, whether horses were used mainly in farming rituals or as actual work horses is difficult to say at this point. Cut marks on Kofun period horse bones indicate that it is quite possible that the horses were eaten and their hides used for leather production (Maruyama 2019: 145-147). Matsui and Kamiya theorised as early as 1994 that in some cases horse bones found inside the stone chambers of tombs might actually be food offerings rather than horse burials (Matsui and Kamiya 1994: 78-79). Of course, the role of the horse during the Kofun period was not limited to its role as a prestige object of the ruling elite. The custom of horse burials which was introduced from the Korean peninsula with the horse and then rapidly spread throughout the Japanese archipelago clearly indicates that the horse also played an important role in Kofun period funerary rituals from the Middle Kofun period onwards. Murals and engravings of horses in burial mounds, over 200 horse burials inside and outside of tombs as well as in settlements and ritual sites (Momosaki 1993: 43, 2008: 161), the deposition of horses or clay or stone miniatures of horses at ritual sites, horse-shaped *haniwa* and richly decorated horse trappings used as grave goods also indicate the very important spiritual role of the horse.

Depictions of human-horse interactions and regional differences

Since the introduction of the horse, horse-shaped *haniwa* became the single most depicted animal among animal-shaped *haniwa*, accounting for approximately 90% of the latter category. Over 450 have been found in Gunma prefecture alone (Gunma-ken bunka shinkō-ka 2021: 25). While research on Kofun period horse culture has thrived in the last 10-15 years, horse-shaped *haniwa* have received little attention. Generally, they can be divided into two categories: horses with horse gear and horses without horse gear. Depictions of horses with horse gear appear to be the most numerous. The horse-shaped *haniwa* share a number of characteristics with the horses depicted in decorated tombs: the vast majority is depicted with a shortened mane and a shortened tail (Figure 1). There is very little up-to-date

information on the geographical distribution of horse-shaped *haniwa* in general and the two sub-types in particular. A distribution map published by Momosaki in 1999 suggests that horse-shaped *haniwa* are present in all regions of Kofun Japan but are most numerous in the Kanto (Momosaki 1999: 385). These large numbers and the wide area of distribution mean that a detailed analysis of horse-shaped *haniwa* is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the analysis will focus on depictions of riders and grooms or, in other words, depictions of human-horse interactions outside of decorated tombs. These depictions are far less numerous than horse-shaped *haniwa* but show a much greater degree of regional variability.



Figure 1: Typical horse-shaped *haniwa* with shortened mane and tail. (Source: ColBase: https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

Rider-shaped haniwa

Depictions of rider-shaped *haniwa* mainly appear in the Late Kofun period (sixth century). At the time of writing only 22 are known. This type of *haniwa*, though essential for interpreting Kofun period human-horse interactions, has received almost no attention. As with the groom *haniwa*, the earliest examples are known from the Kinki region: fragments of two rider *haniwa* were excavated from the Shijō tomb No. 7 in Nara prefecture that has been dated to the second half of the Middle Kofun period (Kashihara Nara kenritsu Kashihara kōkogaku kenkyūjo fuzoku hakubutsukan 2008: 72-73). The vast majority of these *haniwa* have been excavated from sites in the Kanto area, yet unlike the grooms, rider *haniwa* have also been found in northern Kyushu (see Figure 2). What little is known about these *haniwa* is mainly based on the research of Nagumo Yoshiaki who published a first article in 1992 and a second one in 2019. Rider *haniwa* can largely be divided into two different categories: (1) riders with personal ornaments and/or weapons sitting on horses with decorative horse gear or, in other words, depictions high-ranking elites displaying their political, societal and economic rank; and (2) small, barefoot human figures who appear to be carrying a backpack and are sitting on a horse without any horse gear apart from the bridle (Figure 3).

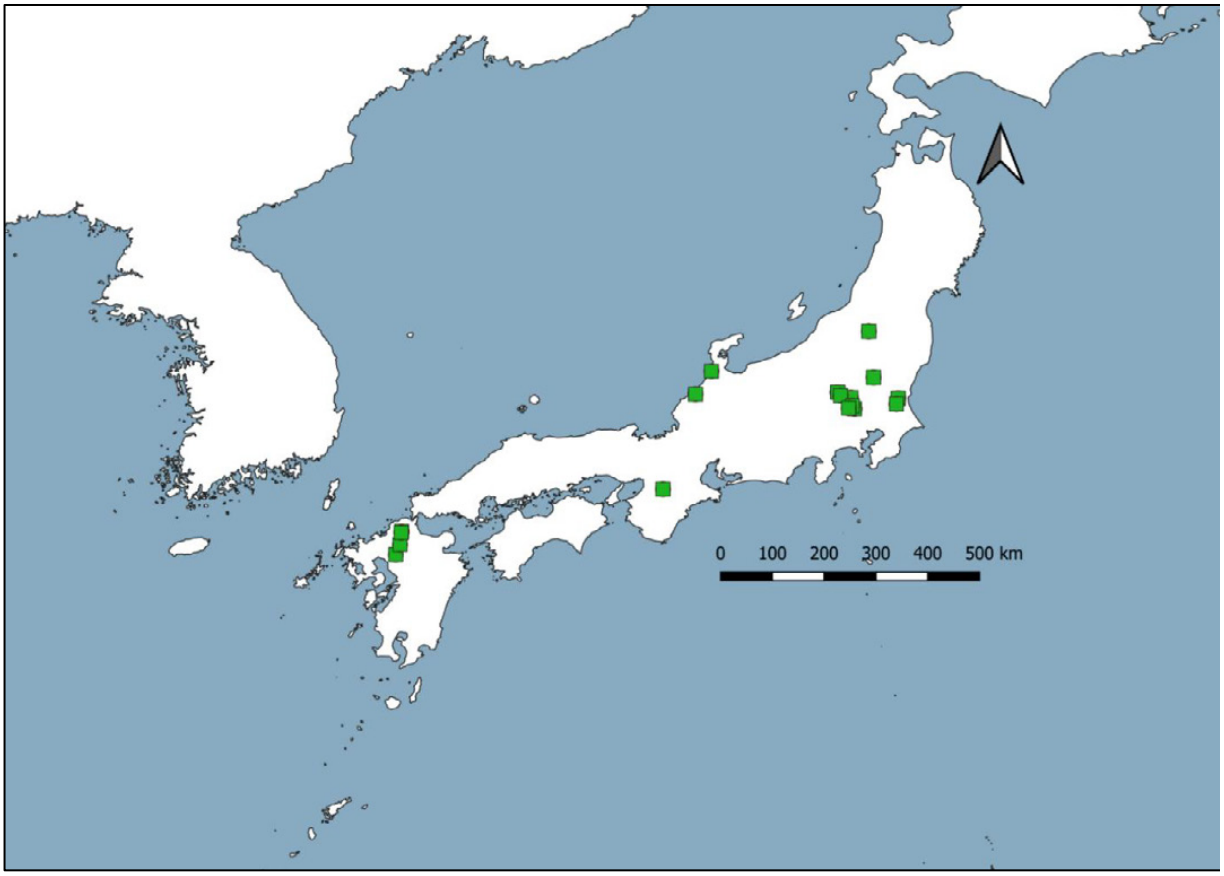

Figure 2: Distribution of rider-shaped *haniwa*. (Map by the author).



Figure 3: Rider-shaped *haniwa*, Takebayashi-Nishihara tomb cluster, sixth century, Gunma prefecture. (Photograph by the author).

Nagumo makes further subdivisions, dividing the riders into three categories based on their clothing and equipment, another three categories based on the hose gear, and a different three categories based on the *haniwa* production techniques such as whether the horse and the *haniwa* are one single statue or whether rider and horse were manufactured independently and then assembled into a rider statue (Nagumo 1992: 78-80). The equipment and ornaments of the riders on horses with decorative horse gear make it possible to differentiate between higher ranking elites such as the rider *haniwa* from the Raiden-jinja-ato tomb (Miura 2018: 25-26) and lower ranking elites such as the two rider *haniwa* from the Yatano Enjiri tomb (Ishikawa-ken Komatsu-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 1992: 45-58). These two sites are of particular interest not only because the rider *haniwa* depicted show different social ranks but also because these are sites where the horse riders are accompanied by groom *haniwa*. These show that the grooms were more than just horse breeders but also acted as companions to the elites in various regions. And they are also evidence for Hashimoto Hiroko's theory that the grooms were sent together with the horses to local elites and that the possession of horses and horse gear is not evidence for the riding skills of these elites. The presence of attendants guiding the horse indicates that the elites depicted in these *haniwa* could not ride, which is why their horse were guided by grooms.

The second type of rider *haniwa* is harder to interpret. Wakamatsu Ryōichi remarked that those riders appeared to be quite young (Wakamatsu 2021:108). Indeed, the one from the Takebayashi-Nishihara tomb cluster appears to be a child. Tentative evidence for this interpretation was found at the Kanai site cluster in Gunma prefecture. During the excavation of the Kanai Shimo-shinden site, the remains of a child and two horses and a sickle—the tool often depicted on groom *haniwa*—were found within the Hr-FA tephra layer in pit house No. 5, the ruins of a house. It appears as if the child sought refuge in the ruined building while fleeing an eruption of Mount Haruna with two horses and died in the pyroclastic flow. In pit house No. 6 of the same site, another child was discovered together with a horse (Yamazaki 2021: 301-315). It should therefore be considered that the small riders on horses without horse gear might be quite similar to the groom *haniwa* in that they represent the horse breeders or in some cases their children.

Depictions of riders on decorated Sue pottery

Another type of horse rider depiction that has received remarkably little attention is rider figures on decorated Sue pottery. This type of pottery originates on the Korean peninsula but decoration evolved to show scenes characteristic for Kofun society. The vast majority is dated to the sixth century, the Late Kofun period. Different types of decorated Sue pottery vessels exist, but vessels with figurative depictions are relatively rare (Andō 2004: 135-136). Unlike rider depictions in decorated tombs and rider *haniwa*, decorated Sue pottery with rider figures is mainly found in western Japan (Figure 4). They appear on Sue pottery that also features other human figures or animal figures such as deer, boar and birds. Andō Hiromichi analysed decorated Sue pottery and concluded that the rider figures most often appear in deer hunting scenes (Andō 2004: 136-137). The riders sit on horses without decorative horse gear and are holding a short bow. One of the best examples is the decorated Sue pottery vessel from the Kamako Maruyama tomb in Okayama prefecture (Figure 5). It depicts a rider on a horse with a bow in one hand and a deer with an arrow protruding from its rear. Andō links these scenes to hunting scenes depicted on Yayoi period objects such as bronze bells and concludes the scenes depict Kofun people struggling with and winning over nature (Andō 2004: 139). Riders also appear in scenes with a human figure with raised arms who seems to be offering something to the rider. Andō argues these figures are priestesses and the depictions show male dominance in Kofun period male-female relationships (Andō 2004: 139). However, neither does the human figure with the raised arms show any kind of sexual features, nor is there much evidence of 'male dominance' in Kofun period society where women were

known to hold high positions (Stein in press). Nevertheless, Andō rightly points out the elevated position of the rider figures among the other figures on decorated Sue pottery vessels. The horse in this case is used to demonstrate the superior social rank of the depicted individual (Andō 2004: 140, 2009: 231).

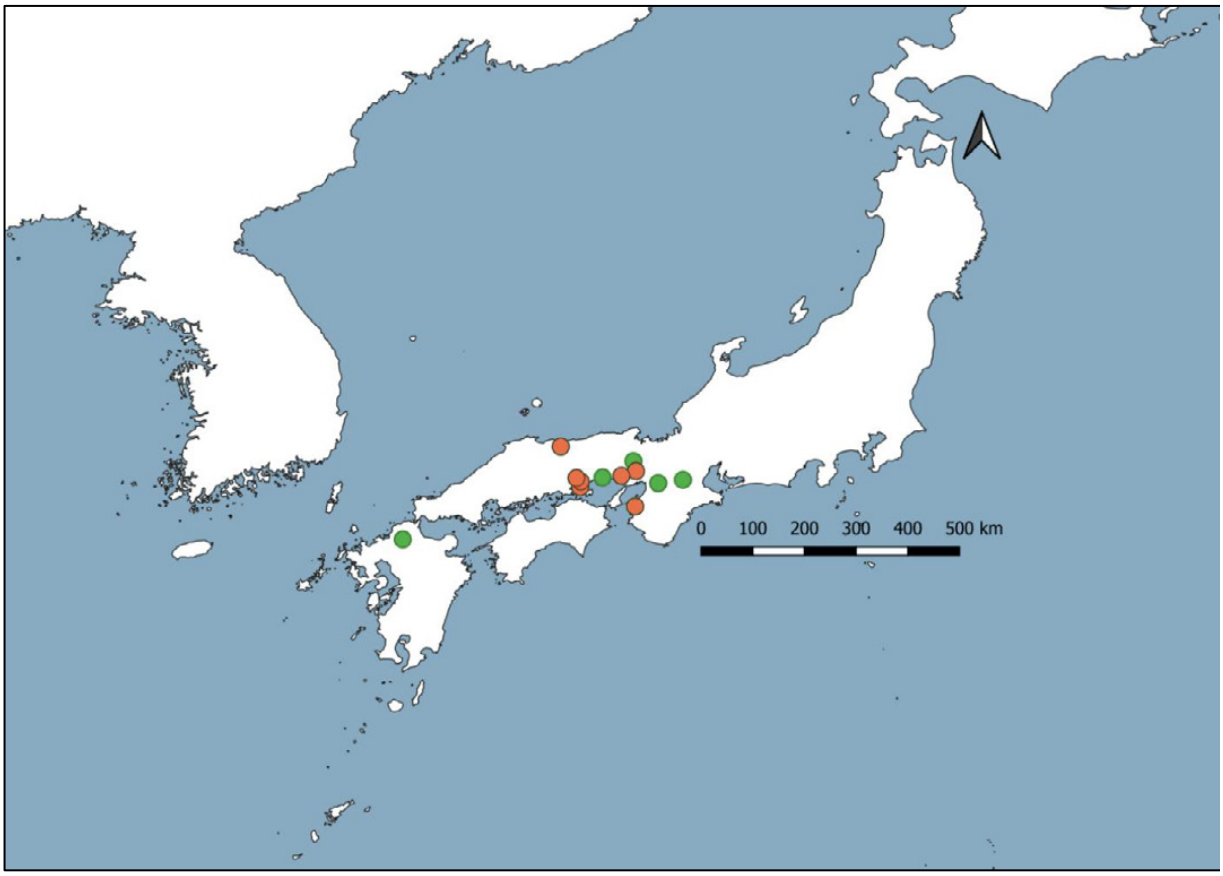

Figure 4: Decorated Sue pottery with depictions of riders (green) and mounted hunters (red). (Map by the author).

The short bow of these riders is of interest here because it contradicts the theory that Kofun period bows were long bows. It might therefore be necessary to consider that in the Late Kofun period a second type of bow existed: a short bow suitable for use while riding. However, the lack of this type of bow among the burial goods might indicate that rather than being perceived as a weapon, this bow appears to have been a hunting bow—a tool for hunting. Hunting on horse-back therefore might have been a custom that was introduced around the Late Kofun period and it appears to have been geographically limited to the Kinki, Kibi and Izumo regions—possibly indicating that this was a pastime that spread among the highest members of the Kofun period elites. While in other regions the horse still had an important role in elite representation and ritual, horse-riding might have become more mundane for the highest-ranking elites as the horse became more common. This development coincides with the appearance of much more resplendent gilt-bronze horse gear that indicates that simply possessing horses was no longer sufficient for elite representation and horses needed to be richly decorated in order to represent their owners' status. Wakasa Tōru theorised that as both deer and boars are depicted as messengers of the gods and—in case of the boar—animals of great strength in the Nihon shoki and

Kojiki, Kofun period depictions of hunting but also falconry may have been utilised to signify the legitimacy and strength of the ruling elites. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that *haniwa* depicting hunting scenes are only found at keyhole-shaped tombs belonging to high-ranking Kofun elites (Wakasa 2021: 104-105, 118-122, Figure 2-24). This theory also fits Andō's assumption that riders depicted on decorated Sue pottery depict an individual of high rank. Hunting might thus have been both a pastime and a demonstration of power for these high-ranking elites. Analysing bow-shaped *haniwa* and human-shaped *haniwa* carrying bows, Ōta Hiroyuki recently argued that *haniwa* depicting high-ranking members of the Kofun elite that hold a bow might have had a similar meaning and may have served to demonstrate the elite's hunting privileges (Ōta 2025: 8). In regions outside Kinki and Kibi, such as Gunma, *haniwa* hunting scenes in this period do not involve horses and only show hunters on foot (Wakamatsu 2021: 102; Wakasa 2021: 44-46, Figure 1-16; Hamamatsu-shi Hakubutsukan 2024: 1).



Figure 5: Decorated Sue pottery vessel from the Kama Komaruyama tomb with a hunting scene. A rider on a horse with decorated horse gear is facing a deer which has been hit by an arrow. (Source: ColBase: https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

That is also true for hunting scenes on decorated Sue pottery: of the two decorated pedestaled vessels excavated from the Late Kofun period Tenjinyama tomb in Fukuoka prefecture, one has the depiction of a rider while the other has a hunter on foot (Keisen-machi Kyōiku Iinkai 2024: 54-56; Figure 3-38, 3-39). Hunting on horse-back might have been even more exclusive and appears to have been an activity that was the privilege of the highest-ranking individuals among the elites in the Late Kofun period.

Depictions in seventh century decorated tombs in Fukushima indicate that by the final Kofun period this practice had spread to lower-ranking local elites in peripheral regions. The early occurrence of the iconography of hunters on horseback in regions such as Kibi and Izumo might be explained by environmental changes in the Osaka plain. It has long been known that increased productivity during the Kofun period led to deforestation. Sue pottery production and ironworking, both industries with a very high demand for wood, have been mentioned as driving factors behind the deforestation (Lyons 2020: 22-24, 2022; Kawase 1999: 367-368; Yasuda 1978: 226). The loss of forests also affected certain animals negatively (Fukasawa and Akasaka 2019: 2) and might have compelled the highest-ranking Kinki elites to choose hunting grounds in nearby regions where forests had not yet been adversely affected and game was still plentiful.

Riders in Kofun period decorated tombs are rare depictions. However, they all share one important characteristic: the legs of the riders are not depicted and the human figures emerge from the back of the horse. Occasionally, horse gear such as the bridle, the saddle or mud guard are depicted (see Zancan, this volume). Past research has tried to identify mounted warriors or hunters among the rider depictions in decorated tombs (Yanagisawa 2022: 71, 118-119; Saitō 1983: 118; Ishiyama 1993: 175). However, only in one instance, the seventh century Izumizaki tomb No. 4 in Fukushima prefecture, can a mounted hunter be identified with sufficient certainty. Others are frequently misidentified as mounted warriors or hunters because Kofun period material culture is not considered when interpreting the depictions. In the case of the famous Gorōyama Tomb there are several reasons for excluding the depictions from the list of armed riders: namely, the bow and the shield. A closer look at the material culture of the Middle and Late Kofun periods tells us that the Kofun period bows deposited inside tombs as warrior equipment were long bows. Only very few examples of Kofun period bows have been excavated as the wood they were made from usually does not survive. However, at a small number of sites the lacquer coating of the bows was preserved and allows the reconstruction of their size. The ritual bow from the fourth century Mesuriyama tomb in Nara prefecture, which was made of iron, has a length of 1.82m (Niiro 1991: 34). The six Middle Kofun period bows from coffin no. 2 of the Doboyama tomb in Ōsaka prefecture had a length of just under 2m (Chin 1960: 19; Kobayashi 1974: 98). The two wooden lacquered bows excavated from the Late Kofun period Nana-mawari Kagamizuka tomb in Tochigi prefecture were fragmented but are thought to have had a length of about 2m (Niiro 1991: 34). In recent years, 10-12 bows were excavated from pit no. 1, one of several pits adjacent to the Funahara tomb. This pit contained an extraordinary amount of very rich burial goods and has an associated radiocarbon date assigned to the second half of the sixth – first half of the seventh century. Based on the remaining lacquer coating and metal fittings, the bows are estimated to have had a length of 220cm (Fukuoka-ken Koga-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 2016: 31-36; Fukuoka-ken Koga-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 2024: 31). Japanese archaeologists specialising in Kofun period arms and armour have pointed out that this type of bow was unsuitable for mounted combat and could not be fired while on horseback (Matsugi 2001: 30-33; Nishikawa 2010: 40). These facts in combination with the visible legs make it highly unlikely that the depiction is a rider. A second depiction from Gorōyama Tomb also frequently identified as a rider or even a horse-riding warrior (Yanagisawa 2022: 71, 118-119) was excluded for similar reasons. It depicts a person holding a shield standing next to a horse. The evidence that this is not a rider can once again be gained from Kofun period material culture. Like the bows, Kofun period shields were made of organic materials (wood and leather) which means they often do not survive. However, they were also coated with lacquer which occasionally survives. The shield recently excavated from the early 5th century Ikusa tomb in Kyoto prefecture had a length of 132cm (Takigawa 2024), the famous shield from the Kasugasha tomb in Miyagi prefecture had a length of 120cm (Sendai-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 2010: 6), and one of the shields from the Toyonaka Ōzuka tomb even measured approximately 142cm (Yanagimoto 1987: 64-76, Table 15). The huge size of the Kofun period shields is also quite obvious when analysing

so-called 'shield-bearer' *haniwa*. These *haniwa* depict a large shield that is being held by a human figure of which only the head and on rare occasions the hands are visible. Everything else is hidden behind the large shield (Figure 6). As with the bows, their length would have made them unsuitable for use on horseback, which in turn makes it highly unlikely that riders would be depicted holding a shield.



Figure 6: Shield bearer *haniwa* showcasing the large size of Kofun period shields. (ColBase: https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

As Kobayashi Ken'ichi rightly observed as early as 1990, there are depictions of riders and depictions of warriors in Kofun period decorated tombs but there are no depictions of mounted warriors (Kobayashi 1990: 152).

Groom haniwa (uma-hiki, 馬曳)

One type of human-shaped *haniwa* that is closely connected to the horse are the so-called *uma-hiki haniwa* or groom *haniwa*. Their exact numbers are difficult to ascertain. An article by Kimine Osaku published in 2014 lists 25 groom *haniwa* (Kimine 2014: 134, Table 1). However, an earlier 1997 article by Sugiyama and colleagues lists over 40 groom *haniwa* (Sugiyama et al. 1997: 168-169, Table 1). Both numbers are much too small and for this research over 80 groom *haniwa* could be identified. Groom *haniwa* are thought to represent members of lower-ranking Kofun period elites that are involved in horse breeding. They have also been classified as companions to higher-ranking elites (Tsukada 2007: 156-159). The majority of these were placed next to horse-shaped *haniwa* with one arm raised as if to lead the horse. While the two most iconic and best known Kofun period *haniwa*, the 'dancing people' from the Nohara tomb in Saitama prefecture (Figure 7), are most likely groom *haniwa*, research on this type of *haniwa* is rather sparse. This lack is rather striking considering that across all media (depictions in decorated tombs and on decorated pottery coffins, decorated Sue pottery and *haniwa*), this is the type of human-animal interaction that is most often depicted.



Figure 7: The two groom *haniwa* from the Nohara tomb. The smaller one on the right carries both a sickle (A) and a rope or whip (B). (ColBase: https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

Groom *haniwa* show great variation in the way they are depicted but share certain characteristics. In addition to being often found next to horse-shaped *haniwa* with one hand raised, they are usually half-body statues and are often depicted with braids called *mizura* which are thought to be a male hairstyle (Tsukada 2007: 156).[3] Many of them are depicted with a tool of some sort such as a sickle attached to the belt (Wakasa 2026: 22; see Figure 7). Others are depicted with what has been interpreted as a rope (Suzuki 2021) or the bridle (Wakasa 2026: 22), but which might just as well be a whip as it is depicted in the Benkei-ga-ana tomb. In fact, one of the more unusual groom *haniwa*, the full-body *haniwa* from the Iwata Futagozuka tomb in Shizuoka Prefecture (Iwata-shi Kyōiku iinkai jimukyoku kyōiku-bu bunkazai-ka 2018: 1), is holding what looks like a short stick with a cord wrapped around it, which might very well be a whip as well.

[3] Human-shaped *haniwa* can be divided into two large groups: half-body statues where the lower half of the body is replaced by standard vessel-shaped *haniwa* and full-body statues with fully sculpted legs and feet. The existence or absence of legs and feet indicates the societal rank of the depicted individuals. Full-body statues of human-shaped *haniwa* are thought to depict individuals of high rank whereas half-body statues depict individuals of lower rank (Tsukada 2007: 153-159).



Figure 8: Groom *haniwa* from the Himezuka tomb (A) and the Tsukamawari tomb No. 4 (B) with different head gear and hair styles. (Photograph by the author).

A larger number of groom *haniwa* is also depicted with headgear (Figure 8)—most likely hats—although in some cases the headgear might also be a helmet. In a small number of cases, they accompany not only a horse but a horse rider such as in the Raiden-jinja ato and Yatano Enjiri tombs. While many raise one hand to the horse, grooms who raise both hands or grooms who do not raise their hands are known as well. However, even if the hands are not raised, the arms are slightly bent and the hands touch the upper torso. The many different attributes groom *haniwa* can have makes it difficult to identify them and differentiate them from other types of *haniwa* such as farmer *haniwa*, dancing *haniwa* or *haniwa* raising one arm (Miyazaki 1990: 198-202). The oldest examples of groom *haniwa* date to the fifth century and have been found in the Kinki region. They then spread eastward with the largest concentration occurring in present day Gunma prefecture (Figure 9). So far, no groom *haniwa* have been excavated from the regions west of Kinki and they are also missing from the Nagano and Yamanashi areas; in other words, in regions where the horse arrives early, groom *haniwa* are curiously absent.

Saitō Tadashi has argued that depictions of riderless horses that are accompanied by attendants—not dissimilar to groom *haniwa*—in Koguryŏ tombs show horses that transported the soul of the deceased to the afterlife (Saitō 1989: 118-120). This interpretation, while interesting, is somewhat speculative as it does not consider the different contexts in which the horse is depicted in Koguryŏ murals. In the late fourth-early fifth century Tonggu tomb No. 12, for example, a riderless horse is depicted next to a warrior raising a sword. The horse is depicted with horse gear and—more importantly—with a helmet. It is thus a cavalry horse shown in a battle scene, probably belonging to the armoured warrior next to it who has dismounted to behead an enemy kneeling at his feet (Kim 1980: 134; Kim 2004: 73). In the Tokhung-ri tomb various horses are depicted. Riderless horses with attendants are depicted on both sides of the passage way leading from the ante chamber to the main chamber. In a procession in the

ante chamber, both heavy cavalry and riding officials are depicted. At the ceiling of the ante chamber mounted hunters can be seen. The main chamber contains a mural of a horse, a tree and an attendant (Kim 2004: 18-25). It is difficult to imagine that the different depictions of horses, riderless or not, all share a similar meaning. The riderless horse with the attendant next to the tree might be related to the Chinese legend of the Fusang tree (Stein 2017: 13-14) and only the riderless horses in the passageway might fit Saitō's theory. In other tombs, such as the Anak tomb No. 3, riderless horses are shown in stables (Ahn 2015: 13, Figure 7) —a scene that also appears to have no connection to the afterlife. It is therefore important to contextualise the depictions before attempting an interpretation.

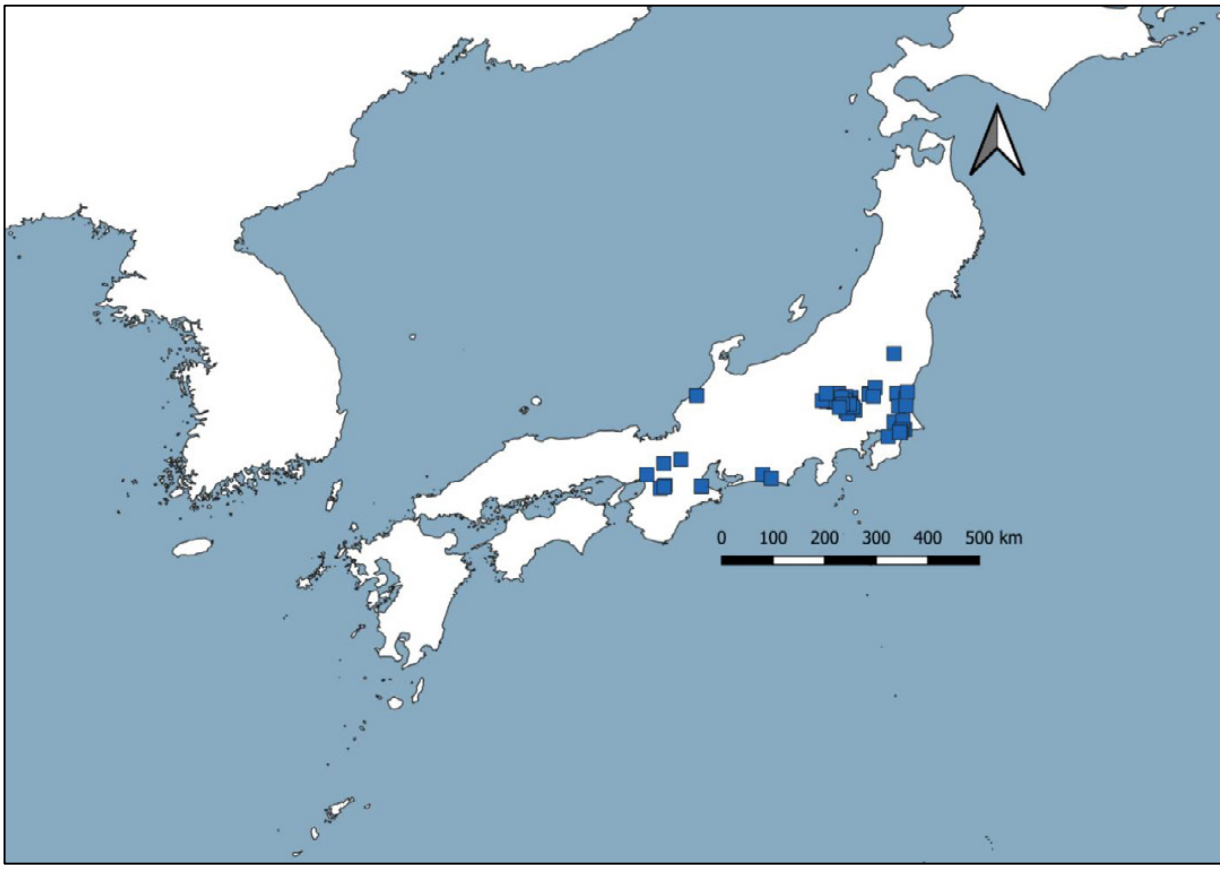

Figure 9: The distribution of groom *haniwa*. (Map by the author).

Hashimoto Hiroko has rightly pointed out that access to and possession of horses and horses gear is not equivalent to being a skilled horse rider. Analysing the femurs of Kofun period individuals for characteristics linked to horse-riding, she found not all remains of individuals buried with horse gear showed signs such as well-developed pilasters that would indicate frequent horse-riding. Kofun period elites thus owned horses but might have lacked the necessary skills to ride them. She therefore suggests that horses were distributed to local elites along with specialists for horse keeping and horse breeding (Hashimoto 2019). The small number of horse-rider *haniwa* and the larger number of groom *haniwa* seems to underline this theory. These *haniwa* occur in the Kinki region only during the Middle Kofun period but not during the Late period. In other regions, such as Kanto, southern Tohoku, groom *haniwa*

have been excavated only from tombs dating to the Late Kofun period. This might indicate that the elites in these regions were still unfamiliar with horses and needed the specialists who in turn became part of the local elite in these regions. It also might explain why depictions of groom *haniwa* are absent in regions where the horse arrived very early such as Kyushu but also present-day Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures. By the time these depictions emerge, the horse had been established in these regions for quite some time and the horse-breeders might not have been held in such a high esteem as in other more peripheral regions. This might also explain the very few depictions of grooms in decorated tombs. While depictions of riders in decorated tombs are quite rare, depictions of grooms are even rarer and are only found in tombs with murals but not in tombs with engravings (Zancan, this volume). The groom depictions from the Ōzuka tomb, the Takehara tomb and Izumisaki tomb no. 4 are all similar to the groom *haniwa*: they are depicted standing next to horse and raising one or both hands to the horse. The same is true for the grooms depicted on the pottery coffins. However, the groom from the Benkei-ga-ana tomb differs. It is depicted next to a herd consisting of one large and four smaller horses. While the groom does raise one arm, it appears to be holding a whip. It has been included here as a groom because it clearly is a depiction of a person involved in horse breeding and the whip appears as a tool of at least one groom *haniwa*, the groom from the Iwata Futagozuka tomb.

In addition to the depictions in tombs regularly classified as decorated tombs, depictions of *uma-hiki* can also be found in two tombs in the Izumo and Kibi regions that are not always considered to be decorated tombs. These Late-Final Kofun period (sixth-seventh century) tombs contained pottery coffins with depictions of grooms. While tombs with decorated pottery coffins are apparently not considered to be decorated tombs by all Japanese archaeologists as they are missing from the most comprehensive list of decorated tombs published to date (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025: 8). Saitō Tadashi included the decorated pottery coffin from Hirafuku in Okayama Prefecture as No. 63 in the list of decorated tombs from Japan published in his 1952 monograph Sōshoku kofun no kenkyū (Saitō 1952: 67-68, Figure 9). He also included the Hirafuku pottery coffin in the section on horse depictions in decorated tombs in the same publication (Saitō 1952: 151, Figure 27). The seventh century pottery coffin from Hirafuku that is displayed in the Tokyo National Museum is the more famous of the two (Figure 10). The groom is depicted in relief on the front side of the coffin. It is depicted in the centre and is flanked by two small stylised trees or fans. Both of its hands are raised to a horse on either side. Above the uma-hiki and both horses a wavy line is depicted. What differentiates this late depiction of a *uma-hiki* is the presence of two horses, rather than one. The wavy line and the two flanking trees/fans are reminiscent of the depiction in the Takahara tomb. In a journal article published in 1957 Mori Teijorō also noted this similarity between the depiction from the Hirafuku pottery coffin and the mural from the Takehara tomb. He points to horse that is being held (引き馬, *hiki-uma*) and the two fan-like projections (翳, sashiba) as being closely related to the Takehara iconography (Mori 1957: 100-101). While more recently Kawano has argued that the depiction on the Hirafuku pottery coffin is not related to narrative-style painted murals such as the Takehara and is 'fundamentally distinct' both stylistically and technically (being a relief rather than a mural) (Kawano 2019: 153-157), this is not true for depictions on the pottery coffin from sixth-seventh century Ike-no-oku C site in Matsue city (Matsue-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 1990: 450-455, 475-476, Fig 25-1/2; 26) whose painted decorations are much more similar to painted murals in decorated tombs. In fact, both the coffin from the Ike-no-oku C site and the coffin from Hirafuku have a special significance as these are the only depictions of grooms in Honshu west of the Kinki region. And while the Hirafuku depictions may be stylistically somewhat different from the murals in decorated tombs as it appears to show Buddhist influences (which might be explained by its seventh century date), it is important evidence that the groom iconography survived beyond the sixth century and the end of *haniwa* production. Therefore, focussing just on minute

stylistically different details and differences in artisan techniques would fall short of considering the importance of the groom iconography across different media.



Figure 10: Final Kofun period groom depiction on the decorated pottery coffin from Hirafuku, Okayama prefecture. (ColBase: https://colbase.nich.go.jp).

Discussion

While horse and rider depictions in decorated tombs are mostly discussed within the framework of Kofun period religious beliefs of the afterlife and the souls' journey, when including other depictions of horses and riders the picture becomes much more nuanced. While the horse plays an important role in Middle, Late and Final Kofun period ritual and religious beliefs, depictions are not limited to this role.

The spread of certain types of depictions of horse-human interactions such as the groom *haniwa* is linked to the establishment of a road network and new pastures for horse breeding. The presence and absence of these mostly Late Kofun period *haniwa* also indicates the spread of the horse and the custom of horse riding. In areas where the horse was introduced early, such as Kyushu, the Osaka Bay area in Kinki and Nagano/Yamanashi, these *haniwa* are absent, while they are much more numerous in the Kanto where the establishment of horse pastures occurred later. Groom *haniwa* also indicate not only the need for specialists for horse breeding but for companions for the local elites.

Rider-shaped *haniwa* found in Kyushu might indicate long-distance trade between local chiefdoms that bypassed the central Kinki region as this type of *haniwa* almost exclusively occurs in the Late Kofun Kanto region. Depictions of riders on horseback on decorated Sue pottery appear to show that hunting on horseback—possibly as an elite pastime—became established in Kinki and certain regions of western Honshu in the sixth century and that this custom had spread to lower-ranking elites in southern Tohoku by the seventh century.

This analysis has shown the great importance of incorporating Kofun period material culture when analysing depictions in Kofun period decorated tombs. Depictions on Kofun Period decorated tombs were grounded in the lived reality of the Kofun people by reflecting their material culture, religious beliefs and associations between the two. If, for example, smaller bows and shields suitable for mounted combat were unknown to them—as evidenced by the material culture—it is highly unlikely that such depictions would have appeared in decorated tombs. This is especially true for depictions for which a fixed iconography already exists, such as the shield-bearer *haniwa*. It is therefore of great importance to consider both the *haniwa* and the funerary objects known from Kofun period burials when interpreting the depictions in Kofun period decorated tombs.

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CHAPTER 8

COLOUR AND DRAWING IN THE PICTORIAL SYSTEMS OF KOFUN TOMBS

ROMINA BARTOCCI[1]

This chapter examines the relationship between colour and drawing in the mural decorations of Kofun-period tombs (fourth - seventh centuries) through an approach that combines archaeological and archaeometric data. The analysis highlights differentiated modes of articulation between colour and drawing. In early tombs, colour functions as a continuous, covering material applied without prior linear organisation, constituting a chromatic field from which forms emerge. In tombs from the final phase of the Kofun period, the pictorial surface is instead organised by a preliminary drawing, generally executed in black ink, which defines forms before the application of pigments, within which colour operates as a controlled element. These modes do not constitute opposing categories, but rather configurations within a field of continuous variation, determined by material, technical, spatial, and regional factors. A quantitative analysis of the corpus reveals regularities in the distribution of techniques, motifs, and pigments, while also demonstrating the absence of any stable correspondence between form and colour, highlighting the role of material availability and funerary rank. The chapter concludes that Kofun-period painting should be understood as a relational system in which colour and drawing are mutually defined through variable configurations.

Keywords: *Kofun, Pigments, Colour, Drawing, Murals*

古墳壁画の絵画体系における色彩と描写

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本稿は、古墳時代（4 世紀～7 世紀）の壁画装飾における色彩と線描の関係を、考古学的および考古科学的データを統合した方法によって検討するものである。分析の結果、色彩と線描の関係には多様な構成様式が存在することが明らかとなった。古墳時代前期の墓では、色彩は事前の線的構成を伴わずに適用される連続的かつ被覆的な物質として機能し、そこから形態が生成される。一方、古墳時代後期の墓では、通常は墨による下描きが先行し、それによって形態が規定された後に顔料が施され、その内部で色彩は制御された要素として機能する。これらの様式は対立的なカテゴリーではなく、物質的・技術的・空間的・地域的要因によって規定される連続的変動の中の構成として理解されるべきである。さらに、対象とする諸古墳の数量的分析は、技法・モチーフ・顔料の分布に一定の規則性を示す一方で、形態と色彩の間に安定した対応関係が存在しないことを明らかにし、資源へのアクセスや葬送における階層性の役割を浮き彫りにした。以上より、本稿は古墳時代の壁画を、色彩と線描が可変的な構成の中で相互に規定し合う関係的なシステムとして捉えることを提案したい。

キーワード：古墳、 顔料、 色彩、線描、 壁画

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Introduction

The role of colour in Kofun period tumulus tombs (fourth - seventh centuries) has generally been approached from two main perspectives:[2] on the one hand, physico-chemical analysis of pigments, and on the other, the typological study of decorative motifs (Yamasaki and Emoto 1979: 1–14). These approaches have made it possible to identify the materials used and to clarify their regional variations, but they have rarely been considered as complementary dimensions of a single operational system (Mori 1985). As a result, the relationship between colour and drawing remains insufficiently explored, as if chromatic material and line belonged to distinct analytical domains.

Rethinking the Relationship between Colour and Drawing

Although interest in decorated tombs dates back to the Edo (Tokuagawa) period (1603-1868), it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that a scientific and systematic approach began to take shape. The 1917 report of the Faculty of Letters of the Imperial University of Kyoto constitutes a foundational moment in the study of funerary materials, followed by Chikashige Takeo's work on the paintings of Hōryūji in 1919, which introduced analytical methods applicable to pictorial surfaces. At the same time, the gradual constitution of the archaeological corpus, particularly in Kyushu and the Kinai, made it possible to stabilise the first decorative typologies. In the following decades, several scholars expanded the discussion to chromatic systems within Japanese material culture, while Yamasaki Ichirō established the first systematic corpus of pigment analyses on around forty tumuli in Kyushu, later complemented by Emoto Masaru through the use of X-ray diffraction (Yamasaki 1954: 781–786).

More recent research has substantially renewed these foundations: physico-chemical analyses have refined our understanding of pigments and their provenance, notably through sulphur isotope studies applied to cinnabar (Minami et al. 2005: 79–84; Minami et al. 2008: 41–48; Shiga 2009: 90–102), as well as through the reclassification of certain green pigments as celadonite rather than glauconite (Nakamuta et al. 2002: 330–333). At the same time, iconographic studies have highlighted the increasing complexity of decorative programmes, particularly in seventh-century tumulus tombs in the Kinai region, marked by the introduction of continental models and by a more structured relationship between drawing and colour (Sano et al. 2009: 119–131).

This chapter seeks to pursue this question from a simple yet theoretically decisive material observation: in decorated tombs of the Kofun period, colour and drawing do not appear to operate according to the same modalities, and their relationship varies recurrently depending on technical, regional, and typological contexts. Without calling into question the relevance of iconographic analysis, which remains essential in a funerary context, the aim is to show that it alone is insufficient to account for the functioning of these paintings. The analysis therefore does not focus solely on pigments themselves, but on the configurations in which colour and line interact, revealing differentiated modes in the construction of the pictorial surface.

Within decorated tombs, Japanese archaeological scholarship generally distinguishes two major groups: mural *sōshoku kofun* (*hekiga-kei sōshoku kofun*), characterised by the direct application of colour onto surfaces, mainly attested between the fifth and sixth centuries, particularly in Kyushu; and *hekiga kofun*, in which mural painting is based on a prior organisation of line, appearing later, in the seventh century,

[2] The Kofun period (c. fourth - seventh century AD) is a phase of ancient Japanese history defined by the construction of monumental burial mounds (*kofun*), associated with the emergence of centralised political structures and significant transformations in funerary practices.

especially in the Kinai region, as exemplified by the Kitora and Takamatsuzuka tombs (Asuka Historical Museum 1999).

This chapter is structured in two complementary parts. The first proposes a mineralogical and functional analysis of the pigments attested in decorated tombs, examining their principal material and chromatic configurations, their chemical nature, their conditions of application, and their modes of articulation with lines, from decorated tombs in Kyushu to those in Nara. The second develops a quantitative analysis of the corpus of decorated tombs and mural tombs, in order to highlight the distribution of techniques, the spatial distribution of motifs, and the regional logics underlying their appearance. A concluding section draws on both levels of analysis to redefine the relationship between colour and drawing as a field of continuous variation.

From this perspective, the paper aims to analyse the modes of construction of the pictorial surface through the articulation between colour, drawing, and spatial configuration.

Methodology

The corpus was constructed from several complementary sets of documentary sources, articulated through a process of cross-referencing and critical comparison. Archaeological and archaeometric sources are jointly mobilised in order to examine the relationships between pigments, line, and the spatial arrangement.

The present analysis is based on the updated National Inventory of Decorated Tombs, which records 849 decorated tombs across Japan and constitutes the principal dataset of this study (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025: 1–17). The earlier inventory published by the National Museum of Japanese History, which comprised 557 entries, was consulted as a historiographical reference in order to situate the current corpus within the development of decorated tomb studies in Japan.

The documentary base was further verified through the comparative syntheses proposed by Kawano Kazutaka and supplemented with published excavation and conservation reports, particularly those produced by the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties n.d.: online database) and the Kashihara Archaeological Institute (Bunkachō 1993; Nara Prefectural Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute 2025).

The analysis of the data operates on two levels. First, the corpus derived from the 2025 National Inventory of Decorated Tombs was coded according to homogeneous criteria relating to execution techniques, the presence of pigments, decorative motifs, and the localisation of decorated surfaces, allowing systematic comparison across the corpus. This quantitative approach makes it possible to identify regularities in the distribution of pigments, chromatic combinations, and types of motifs, both geometric and figurative. Second, a qualitative and spatial analysis relates these elements to the architectural arrangement of funerary chambers and the position of the deceased, in order to identify underlying principles of internal structuring.

Finally, a comparative regional approach makes it possible to identify significant variations in chromatic and graphic systems, interpreted as differences in material and technical traditions. This regional dimension constitutes a central aspect of the methodology, insofar as it allows pigment choices to be related to the specific cultural contexts in which they were produced.

From this perspective, the study does not simply offer a synthesis of existing data but proposes an analytical reconfiguration of the documentary base within an interpretative framework aimed at identifying differentiated configurations (Kawano 2021). These methodological considerations provide

the basis for an initial analysis of the materiality of pigments, focusing on their properties, conditions of application, and modes of distribution within funerary contexts (Yonekawa et al. n.d.: 231–243).

Pigments in Decorated Tombs: Materials and Regional Distribution

Pigment studies highlight significant variations in the modes of colour application in funerary contexts of the Kofun period, particularly in decorated tombs (Yamasaki 1954: 781–786; Yamasaki and Emoto 1979: 1–14). These differences, often described in typological or descriptive terms, can instead be understood as distinct configurations in the relationship between coloured matter, support, and the structuring of the visible, without the need to define them as rigid categories (Saitō 1997). The analysis of materials thus makes it possible to clarify their concrete modalities (Tsuruta 2002: 189–199).

In decorated tombs, which are particularly well attested in Kyushu, the palette is based on locally available materials that underwent minimal transformation (Mori 1985; Honda 1988: 63–79). These consist of pigments of clayey or superficial mineral origin: red (*bengara*), white (kaolinite), yellow (goethite), green (celadonite), and black (manganese oxides or carbon). By contrast, decorated tombs of the seventh century correspond to a distinct pictorial configuration, for which the tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora provide the clearest examples (Izumi and Hasegawa 2010). Their palette, composed of imported mineral pigments and organic colorants, reflects a significant material and technical transformation (Sano et al. 2009: 119–131). Cinnabar, lead white, malachite, azurite, and carthamine (*beni*) belong to a system of production and circulation of materials that extends beyond the local scale. This transformation does not concern substances alone but also involves a different logic in the use of pigments.

White, for example, introduces an initial form of instability in the definition of chromatic functions. Composed of kaolinite or halloysite, two clay minerals derived from the weathering of feldspars, it is generally referred to by the term *hakudo* (‘white earth’) (Yamasaki and Emoto 1979; Saitō 1997). This identification, however, remains ambiguous. Depending on the context, white may function either as an underlayer (*shita-nuri*), covering the entire surface prior to further intervention, or as a visible pictorial layer. It is therefore defined not only by its composition, but also by its position within the stratigraphy of the surface, oscillating between support and manifestation. Moreover, other materials may have been used in certain cases, such as calcium-based whites derived from limestone or burnt shells, producing lime, which could serve as a preparatory ground, as attested in contexts such as Takamatsuzuka (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

This indeterminacy does not disappear with other clay-based pigments but is reformulated differently. Yellow, identified as goethite, sometimes associated with limonitic phases, also displays a degree of instability, this time chromatic rather than functional (Honda 1995: 63–79). Its hue varies, degrades, and tends toward brownish tones, making stable visual identification difficult. This variability underscores the fact that colour depends not only on the nature of the pigment, but also on the conditions of transformation and preservation of the material (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Green, produced by celadonite, a volcanic phyllosilicate, is distinguished by its anchoring in specific geological contexts, particularly in Kyushu and certain areas of southwestern Honshu. Long confused with glauconite, it illustrates both the limits of earlier identifications and the contributions of recent mineralogical analyses (Nakamuta et al. 2002). Its uneven distribution suggests that the composition of palettes depends not only on technical choices, but also on access to resources.



Figure 1: Calcite ($CaCO_3$), raw mineral sample. (After Britannica; Mindat.org).

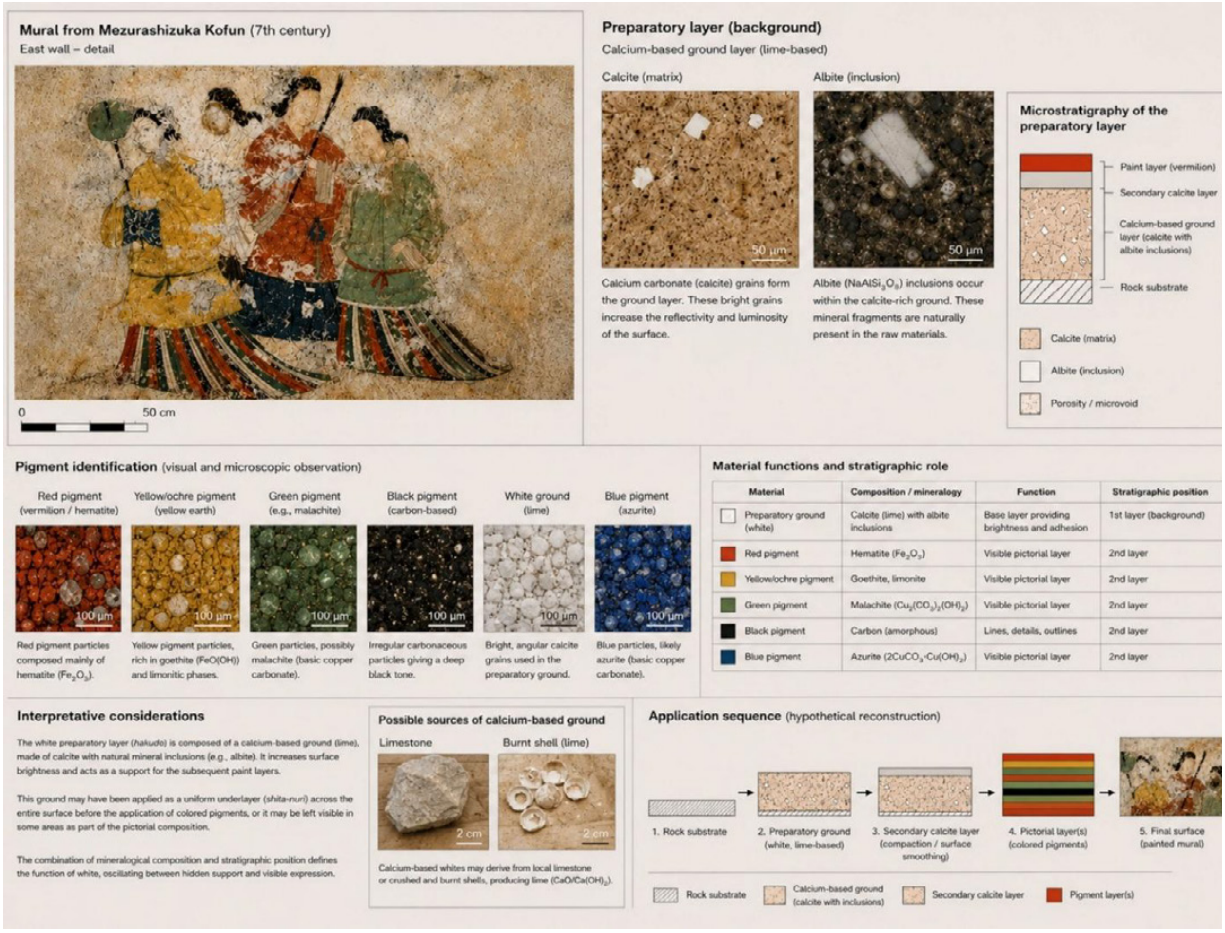

Figure 2: Female attendants on the west wall of the burial chamber (*genshitsu*), Takamatsuzuka tumulus, seventh century, Nara, Japan. Archaeometric reconstruction of the preparatory ground layer showing a calcium-based white preparation with albite inclusions enhancing the luminosity of vermilion pigments. (After Sano, Hayakawa and Miura 2009: 119–131).



Figure 3: Goethite (FeO(OH)), yellow ochre mineral. (After Wikipedia; Mindat.org).

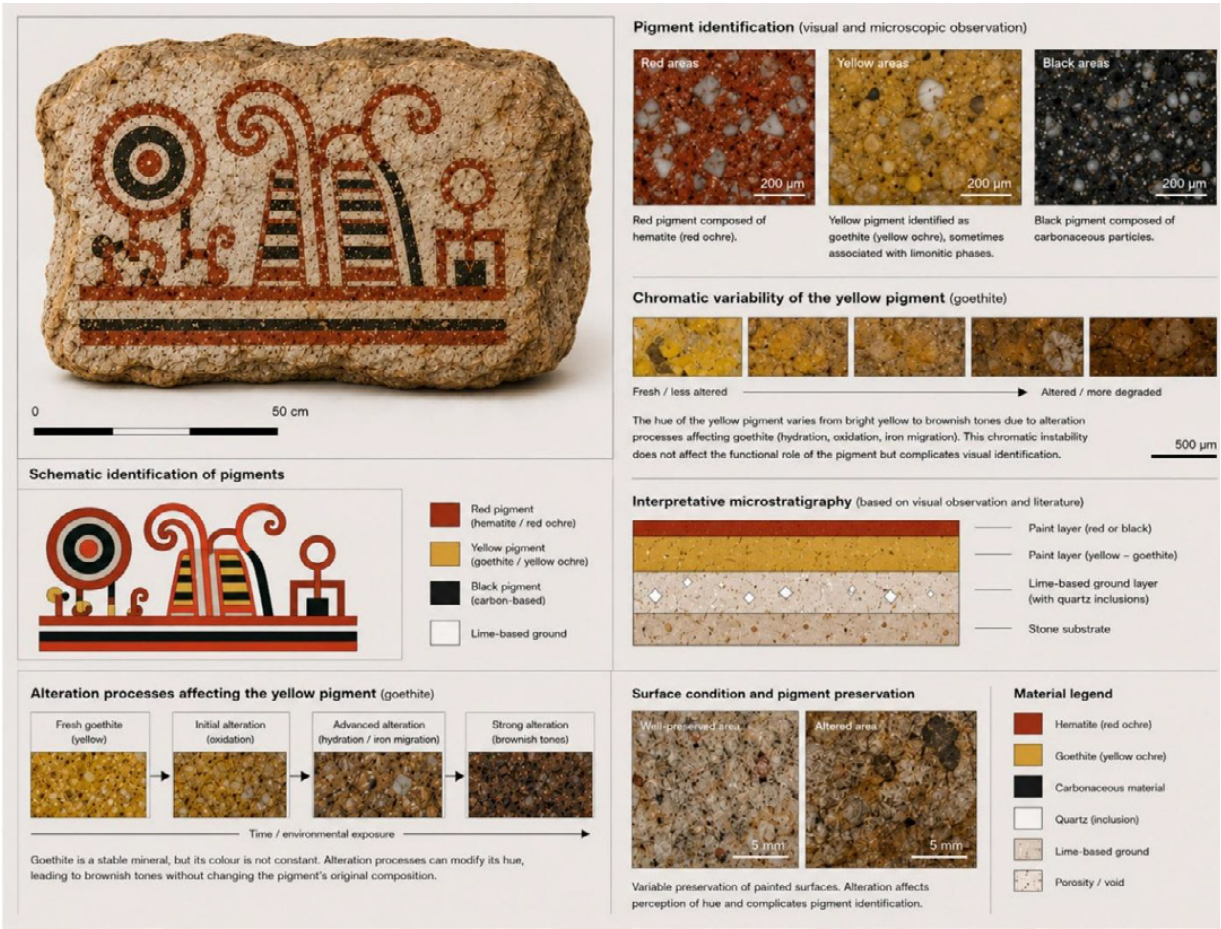

Figure 4: Painted geometric decoration on the inner wall of the burial chamber of Mezurashizuka *kofun*, sixth century, Kyushu. Archaeometric reconstruction of pigment identification and chromatic alteration processes, with particular emphasis on goethite-based yellow pigments. (After: Bunkachō 1993)

Within this continuum of variation, black introduces another type of differentiation. Its dual origin—manganese oxides or amorphous carbon derived from combustion—does not necessarily result in immediate visual distinction, but reflects distinct technical processes (Yamasaki and Emoto 1979). This coexistence of material solutions for a single colour indicates a lack of strict standardisation and the persistence of differentiated local traditions. Black thus appears less as a unified category than as a point of convergence between heterogeneous practices.

It is, however, with red that the pigmentary system structure appears with clarity. *Bengara*, derived from hematite and limonite, constitutes one of the oldest pigments in the Japanese archipelago, widely available in the local environment and attested well before the Kofun period (Mori 1985; Honda 1995). Cinnabar is added to this tradition, whose introduction corresponds to more specialised supply networks, as demonstrated by sulphur isotope analyses (Minami et al. 2005; Kawano et al. 2014). The coexistence of these two forms of red does not reflect a simple chronological succession, but rather a progressive differentiation of uses, embedded in distinct material and technical conditions.

The analysis of pigments in the tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora makes it possible to specify concretely the material conditions of these transformations, which are examined here due to the exceptional state of their archaeological and archaeometric documentation (Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties 2008).

Reds constitute the best-documented group: at Takamatsuzuka, analyses have identified three components, mercury-based cinnabar, iron oxide-based *bengara* (Shiga 2009), and lead-based minimum, also attested at Kitora, where the Four Divinities and the astronomical chart are executed primarily in cinnabar red. Cinnabar likely originated from mercury deposits in the province of Yamato (present-day Uda district, Nara Prefecture) (Ishihara et al. 2000: 283–297), with an extension toward the deposits of Niu in the former province of Ise, whose exploitation is recorded in the *Nihon Shoki* as early as 698 (Kitada et al. 2017: 973–980). Tubular *bengara*, a biogenic iron oxide, constituted a complementary resource available locally, particularly in the wetland areas of the Nara basin.

Blues and greens are represented by azurite (*iwa-gunshō*) and malachite (*iwa-rokushō*), derived from regional copper deposits, notably the Mitomi mine (Gose, Nara Prefecture) and the Tada-Kōzan mine (Hyōgo Prefecture) (National Research Institute for Cultural Properties 2007).

Yellows correspond to ochres (*ōdo*), locally sourced clay materials, while blacks result from the combination of ink and manganese-based compounds extracted in the regions of Yoshino and Tenri.

The transformations observed in materials and techniques cannot be fully understood without being situated within a broader context of circulation of knowledge and practices, marked both by the diffusion of Buddhism and by the intensification of technical exchanges with the continent.

The *Nihon Shoki* preserves scattered traces of this process, which reflect less a series of isolated events than a gradual transformation (Aston 1972). During the reign of Suiko (554-628), in the early seventh century, the first attempts to institutionalise craft practices related to image-making appear. A few years later, around 610, tradition attributes to the Korean monk Donchō the introduction of techniques for producing paper, ink, and certain pigments, thereby opening new material possibilities. Later still, under Jitō (645-703), in the late seventh century, the first local productions of lead white are attested, while under Monmu (683-707), around 697, a more structured supply of mineral pigments from various provinces began to emerge. Taken together, these indications do not constitute a strict or homogeneous chronology, but rather a set of gradual transformations in the material conditions of pictorial production.

In this context, pigment analysis does not reveal a sudden shift between clearly differentiated configurations, but rather a progressive transformation in the modes of articulation between colour, support, and graphic structure (Sano et al. 2009). Depending on the context, colour may function as a covering material, producing spatial effects through surface continuity, or as an element whose application is conditioned by pre-defined forms. These should not, however, be understood as opposing configurations, but as variations in the ways colour is constrained, directed, or mobilised within distinct technical and iconographic systems.

From this perspective, colour cannot be considered a simple autonomous iconographic attribute, but instead reflects varying degrees of dependence on the material, technical, and spatial conditions of its emergence.

Colour and Representation: Quantitative Analysis of the Corpus

Quantitative analysis of the documented corpus derived from the 2025 National Inventory of Decorated Tombs and associated archaeological publications makes it possible to examine, at a national scale, the relationships between colour, drawing, and funerary space (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025: 1–17). Far from serving as a simple validation tool, these data provide an overall reading of the configurations identified in the first part, making their variations, regularities, and discontinuities across regional and typological contexts visible.

Observations drawn from the corpus reveal situations in which colour operates independently of any prior linear structuring (Yamasaki 1954; Yamasaki and Emoto 1979). In many early assemblages, but not exclusively in Kyushu, colour appears as a covering substance, directly applied to the surface without being constrained by a drawn outline. The examples discussed here are not intended as an exhaustive inventory, but rather to illustrate recurrent compositional logics observed across the corpus. Thus, in complex assemblages such as the Ōzuka tumulus (sixth century, Kyushu) (Nagashima 1999: 337–363), where six colours are attested, chromatic zones follow one another without intermediate contours, each tone contributing to the definition of an area through simple juxtaposition.

Two cases illustrate this configuration particularly clearly. In a number of earlier monochrome decorated tombs, notably those of the Idosawa A-group (Miyagi Prefecture, eastern Honshu), red pigment is applied directly across the walls of the burial chamber without any preliminary contour drawing. Colour does not here structure space through a prior graphic framework; rather, it establishes a continuous chromatic surface within which motifs may subsequently emerge as internal differentiations. A comparable logic is attested in the *bengara* documented in several decorated tombs of the Kurume region (northern Kyushu, fourth-sixth century) (Honda 1988). Extending across large portions of the funerary chamber, these monochrome applications create an immersive chromatic environment in which figurative or geometric differentiation appears as a secondary articulation of an already unified coloured surface. In both cases, geographically and chronologically distinct, colour precedes and generates form rather than filling it.

This mode of operation is also found in the use of other pigments (Honda 1995). Yellow, for instance, is frequently applied in flat areas without prior outlining. At Chausuyama and Tashiro-Ōta (sixth century, Kyushu), it defines or fills zones through simple juxtaposition with red, without the intervention of linear drawing. Similarly, green, attested at Mezurashizuka (Kyushu) or Idera (Kyushu), functions as an element of surface differentiation without being systematically subordinated to a pre-existing drawing. In these various cases, colour does not fill a form, but participates in its progressive constitution.

However, analysis of the corpus also reveals different configurations in later assemblages, where the relationship between colour and drawing tends to be reconfigured (Saitō 1997). The Kōkadani tomb (sixth century, Kyushu) offers an intermediate articulation. A lighter red covers the entire surface, while a more saturated red is used to emphasise certain motifs. The distinction does not rely on a clear separation between ground and figure, but on variations in intensity within a single chromatic field, without systematic recourse to contour lines.

In seventh-century assemblages, particularly in the tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora, drawing, executed in black ink, functions as a prior organising principle of the pictorial surface, delimiting forms before the application of pigments (Izumi and Hasegawa 2010). Within this framework, red, predominantly cinnabar, is applied within already established outlines. Colour no longer acts primarily as a generative surface material, but as an element distributed within a pre-existing graphic system.

These different configurations demonstrate that the relationship between colour and drawing cannot be reduced to a simple opposition but must instead be understood as a set of variable modes of articulation (Kawano 2021). It is precisely this variability that quantitative analysis of the corpus makes it possible to grasp on a broader scale, by highlighting regularities and divergences in the distribution of techniques, motifs, and materials.

The corpus reveals a marked imbalance in the distribution of techniques (Yonekawa et al. n.d.). Direct colour painting (*saishoku*), although widely documented, remains a minority practice overall, while linear incision (*senkoku*) constitutes the dominant mode, particularly in the eastern regions of the archipelago. This asymmetry cannot be interpreted simply as a difference in frequency but corresponds to two distinct modes of structuring the decorated surface: on the one hand, a chromatic logic in which colour operates as a covering substance; on the other, a linear logic based on incision as the primary structuring operator.

Between these two poles, mixed techniques, combining incision and colour, or bas-relief enhanced with pigments, introduce a particularly significant intermediate zone. Far from representing simple technical variants, they explicitly raise the question of operational sequence: does colour complete the sign, or does it precede it? Stratigraphic analyses from decorated tombs in northern Kyushu, including the Ōzuka and Mezurashizuka *kofun* in Fukuoka Prefecture, as well as the Takehara tomb in Miyawaka (Fukuoka Prefecture), indicate that the relationship between incision and pigment application was not uniform, but varied according to local technical practices and regional traditions. Rather than revealing a stable hierarchy between colour and drawing at the scale of the corpus, these data point to differentiated configurations in their articulation. A substantial group of decorated tombs from the Tohoku region, particularly Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures, also appears in the revised corpus, whereas these assemblages remained marginal in earlier datasets. The distributional framework must therefore be nuanced: red painting cannot be regarded as an exclusively Kyushu phenomenon, although eastern Honshu examples employ distinct techniques and decorative schemes.

The 2025 inventory additionally recognises the *kōda* technique, a stippled decoration executed with a pointed metal tool, attested primarily in northern Kyushu and previously misidentified as flaked painted surfaces, as a distinct decorative category. Its inclusion reinforces the argument that no binary opposition between colour and incision adequately captures the full range of pictorial practices attested in decorated tombs.

If we now consider the distribution of motifs, the relative dissociation between the two registers becomes even more apparent. The case of concentric circles (*dōshin enmon*) is particularly revealing (National Museum of Japanese History 1993); they constitute one of the most characteristic motifs in

the corpus, with a particularly high concentration in northern Kyushu where they appear almost systematically in painted assemblages (Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of main motifs and dominant chromatic associations. Data derived from the National Inventory of Decorated Tombs (Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025; N = 849 tombs). N indicates the number of occurrences per motif category; a single tomb may present more than one motif. Percentages calculated on N = 673 tombs with identifiable decoration. Note: the reduced relative frequency of concentric circles (*dōshin enmon*) compared to earlier versions of this table reflects the expanded corpus of the 2025 inventory, which incorporates a substantially larger number of tombs from eastern Honshu where incised motifs predominate; within the Kyushu region, concentric circles remain the dominant painted motif.

Decorative Motif	N	%	Dominant Chromatic Association
Human figures / horse riders (*jinbutsu, kiba jinbutsu*)	108	16.0%	Red in Kyushu; linear incision in Kanto-Tohoku
Triangular motifs (*sankakumon*)	103	15.3%	Red / mixed in Kyushu; incision in Honshu
Boats (*fune*)	94	14.0%	Linear incision in more than 85% of cases
Weapons and armour (*yumi, ya, tate*)	80	11.9%	Incision; occasional red in Kyushu
Buildings / architectural elements (*ie mon*)	79	11.7%	*Bas-relief* (Miyazaki); incision elsewhere
Concentric circles (*dōshin enmon*)	72	10.7%	Red in Kyushu; linear incision in Honshu
Grid patterns (*kōshimon*)	57	8.5%	Linear incision / *bas-relief*
Birds (*tori*)	44	6.5%	Predominantly linear incision
Simple circles / beads (*enmon, tamazamon*)	33	4.9%	Red / mixed in Kyushu; incision in Honshu
Animals (*dōbutsu*)	33	4.9%	Linear incision; occasional red
Horse (*uma*)	29	4.3%	Linear incision / *bas-relief*
Fern-like / spiral motifs (*warabite mon, tomoe mon*)	18	2.7%	Red painting in northern Kyushu (partial association)

Concentric circles present a remarkable characteristic: their form remains constant while the mode of execution varies radically across regions. In Kyushu tombs, concentric circles are almost systematically painted in red, generally *bengara* or cinnabar (Figure 5 and Figure 6), whereas in eastern Honshu they appear almost exclusively as incised. The same motif thus shifts from a chromatic regime to a linear one without major transformation of its structure. This dissociation shows that colour is not intrinsically linked to the motif but depends on variable technical and material configurations.



Figure 5: Incised and painted geometric decoration on the inner walls of the burial chamber (*genshitsu*) of the Senzoku tomb (Chisenkō kofun), Kumamoto Prefecture, sixth century, Japan. Digital reconstruction of the carved stone motifs and surviving red pigment traces on the chamber surfaces. (After Bunkachō 1983).

A comparable logic can be observed in the case of human and equestrian figures (Saitō 1961). Here again, distribution is uneven. In Kyushu assemblages, such figures are frequently associated with red painting, whereas in the Kanto and Tohoku regions they are almost always incised. The correlation between motif and colour, often assumed in iconographic approaches, is thus relativised. The presence or absence of colour does not depend on figurative content, but on regional conventions and material conditions.

This dissociation becomes even more evident when considering motifs such as boats, weapons, or grid patterns (Saitō 1952). By contrast, certain geometric or vegetal motifs, such as spirals (*warabitemon*), appear in several polychrome tombs of Kyushu, including Mezurashizuka, Ōzuka, Tsukahanazuka, and Hinooka, where red, green, and yellow pigments are combined in varying ways. Taken together, these data do not reveal a simple correspondence between form and colour, but rather a differentiated system in which each parameter, motif, technique, and material, follows partially distinct logics.



Figure 6: Painted motifs and concentric circle decoration (*dōshin enmon*) on the inner walls of the burial chamber, Gorōyama kofun, sixth century, Kyushu, Japan. Digital composite reconstruction highlighting the spatial distribution and preservation of mural motifs within the stone chamber. (After Wikimedia Commons, photograph by Saigen Jiro CC0 1.0 Public Domain).

In multi-chambered horizontal stone-chamber tombs, y*okoanashiki sekishitsu*, particularly those classified as *hekiga-kei sōshoku kofun*, the internal organisation of funerary space confirms this interpretation. Decoration is concentrated primarily within the burial chamber proper, *genshitsu*, that is, the innermost funerary space of the tomb. In the present study, the term *genshitsu* is used in a functional sense to designate the principal burial chamber; in multi-chambered *yokoanashiki sekishitsu* tombs, this space often corresponds architecturally to the rear chamber, *kōshitsu*, according to the standard typology of horizontal stone chambers. By contrast, anterior chambers and access corridors constitute transitional spaces within the funerary structure.

In painted tombs, colour is distributed according to a marked spatial hierarchy. Pigment tends to concentrate on the principal walls of the *genshitsu*, particularly the rear and lateral walls, whereas corridors, *sendō*, entrance areas, and transitional spaces are more frequently associated with incised decoration. This distribution suggests that colour did not merely function as an aesthetic addition, but participated directly in the spatial articulation of the funerary environment (Kawakami et al. 1999: 95–140).

This tendency appears particularly clearly in multi-chambered tombs, where the innermost chamber often presents the highest concentration of painted decoration. In these contexts, colour tends to

concentrate in areas associated with burial deposition, reinforcing the progressive interiorisation of chromatic space within the funerary structure.

Conversely, several tombs in Kumamoto and Miyazaki display *bas-relief* and painted decorations in entrance structures or on surfaces oriented toward the exterior, partially reversing this tendency toward internal concentration and exposing decorated surfaces at visible or liminal points of the funerary architecture. In Miyazaki, a substantial proportion of decorated funerary structures belong not to standard *yokoanashiki sekishitsu* tombs but to underground horizontal tombs, *chikashiki yokoana-bō,* whose architectural organisation differs significantly from stone-built chamber tombs and may partly account for the greater visibility of decorated entrance areas and exterior-facing surfaces. A particularly significant case is represented by the 74 decorated funerary structures documented in Miyazaki Prefecture, the majority of which belong to the *chikashiki yokoana-bō* type. Their decoration consists predominantly of architectural motifs executed in relief or incision, including representations of ridge beams (*munagi*), posts (*tsukabashira*) and roof structures, a configuration that differs substantially from standard stone-chamber decorated tombs. These internal variations also extend to the geographical scale (Table 2) (Kawano 2021).

Table 2: Distribution of decoration according to spatial location and dominant technique (N = 887 spatial occurrences across 673 tombs with identifiable decoration). A single tomb may present decoration in more than one spatial location; totals therefore exceed the number of tombs.

Location	N	%	Dominant Technique
Burial chamber (*genshitsu/kōshitsu*) *	480	54.1%	All techniques; painting dominant
Anterior chambers and transitional spaces (*zenshitsu*)	210	23.7%	Colour painting + incision
Access corridor (*sendō*)	95	10.7%	Colour painting + incision
External walls (*gaiheki*)	48	5.4%	Coloured bas-relief (Kumamoto, Miyazaki)
Sarcophagi and lithic elements	42	4.7%	Painting + bas-relief
Blocking stones (*heisokuseki*)	12	1.4%	Incision / relief

* In multi-chambered *yokoanashiki sekishitsu* tombs, the rear chamber (*kōshitsu*) corresponds to the burial chamber proper (*genshitsu*): both terms designate the innermost funerary space, the former positionally, the latter functionally. In the present table, these two designations have been incorporated into a single category in order to avoid double-counting. The N for this category (480) reflects the complete recoding of the 2025 corpus; the increase from the figure reported in earlier versions of this study (325 + 52 = 377) results from the extension of the corpus and the addition of previously unrecorded sites.

The updated corpus reveals broad regional differences in the distribution of decorative techniques. Painted tombs remain particularly concentrated in northern and central Kyushu, where red pigment, sometimes combined with secondary colours such as green or yellow, appears frequently on funerary surfaces. In eastern regions of Honshu, incised decoration generally predominates, although the corpus also documents painted tombs in the Tohoku region, where incision nevertheless remains the dominant decorative technique. Rather than indicating a simple east–west opposition, the evidence suggests

uneven regional distributions shaped by distinct technical traditions, funerary typologies, and chronological developments.

These differences do not correspond to a straightforward chronological evolution, since decorated tombs span the fourth to the eighth century, but instead reflect multiple regional systems of funerary decoration. The availability and circulation of pigments may also have influenced these distributions (Yajima 1961: 28–38). Cinnabar, for example, depended on access to specific mineral sources, whereas red ochre, *bengara*, appears more widely distributed across different regions and chronological phases. The geography of decorative practices therefore cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model, but emerges from the interaction between material availability, regional traditions, funerary architecture, and modes of spatial organisation.

The symbolic association between red pigment and funerary ritual nevertheless predates these seventh-eighth century normative codifications. Late Yayoi funerary contexts, in the second half of the second century to the mid-third century, already attest the use of red pigments in elite burials, particularly in stone coffin tombs associated with emerging regional leadership, as illustrated by the recent discovery at Yoshinogari (Saga Prefecture), where traces of red pigment were identified within a Late Yayoi stone coffin tomb. This continuity suggests that the legal codification of colour under the Ritsuryō system formalised pre-existing symbolic and funerary practices rather than introducing entirely new chromatic meanings (Asahi Shimbun 2023).

This material and geographical distribution cannot, however, be fully understood without taking into account the normative framework that gradually structured the social function of colour from the early seventh century onward. The *kan'i jūnikai* system, established in 603, instituted a direct correspondence between colour and court rank: purple (*murasaki*) was reserved for the highest imperial elite, vermilion (*hi*) for high officials, followed by green, light blue, yellow, and black for successively lower grades. This chromatic hierarchy extended beyond court attire into funerary practice, as attested by the *Sōsō ryō*, the funerary code integrated into the *Yōrō Code* of 718, which prescribed mourning garments and ceremonial procedures according to the rank of the deceased.[3] The subsequent codification under the *Taihō* (701) and *Yōrō Codes* (718) further subjected funerary practices to explicit legal regulation, including the size of tombs, the nature of grave goods, and ritual procedures.[4]

These legal codifications did not operate in isolation from existing practices. Rather, they formalised and stabilised correspondences between colour and social distinction that are already observable in the archaeological record. Isotopic analyses of cinnabar, for instance, indicate systematic variations in purity and provenance, with high-status tombs more frequently associated with selected or imported materials.[5] In this perspective, the distribution of pigments cannot be reduced to material availability or regional tradition alone but reflects the intersection of technical constraints and socially codified distinctions. A case such as Sakurai Chausuyama (fourth century, Nara Prefecture) makes it possible to grasp concretely the implications of these data. In this tomb, cinnabar covers all internal surfaces, walls, ceiling, and floor, and stratigraphic analyses have shown that the blocks were already coated with pigment prior to their placement. Colour therefore does not function as a finishing layer but

[3] For the funerary regulations of the *Sōsō ryō* and the Yōrō Code, see Hérail (2008–2011); Aston (1972); Inoue et al. (1976).

[4] The question of the relationship between colour and social status is not addressed here, as it lies beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on the relationships between the materiality of pigments, drawing, and spatial organization.

[5] See Kawano (2021: 50), especially on the Sugu-Okamoto royal tomb, where high-purity imported cinnabar is associated with elite burial contexts.

accompanies construction itself. Moreover, the distinction between cinnabar on the interior and *bengara* in the outer layers reveals a clear differentiation of materials. The distribution of pigments appears differentiated according to spatial zones, suggesting that the architectural configuration of the tomb structures their allocation (Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of chromatic techniques by region (N = 649 tombs with identifiable technique; data extracted from Sakaguchi and Murakami 2025). 'Red only': monochrome red application (*bengara* or cinnabar). 'Red + green/yellow': bi- or trichromatic assemblages without additional colours. 'Polychromy': three or more distinct pigments. 'Incision only': linear incision, bas-relief, and dotted *kōda* technique without recorded pigment application.

Region	Red only	Red + green / yellow	Polychromy	Incision only	Total
Fukuoka (Northern Kyushu)	32	5	9	36	**82**
Saga	3	1	1	25	**30**
Nagasaki	1	0	0	14	**15**
Oita	21	4	1	6	**32**
Kumamoto	85	4	3	99	**191**
Miyazaki	25	0	0	49	**74**
Western Honshu (Shimane, Tottori, Okayama)	7	0	0	72	**79**
Kinai and central Honshu (Osaka, Nara, Hyōgo)	2	0	0	1	**3**
Kanto and Tohoku (Kanagawa, Chiba, Fukushima, Miyagi)	50	0	0	93	**143**
TOTAL	**226**	**14**	**14**	**395**	**649**

These data indicate a system linking colour, drawing, and space, with certain assemblages introducing a more radical transformation. The tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora constitute particularly significant cases, insofar as they allow observation of a system in which drawing systematically precedes colour and strictly determines its modes of application (Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties 2008).

The emergence of pictorial systems based on systematic preparatory drawing and transfer techniques reflects a broader shift in the conditions of image production in the seventh century, marked by intensified technical circulation linked to the spread of Buddhism and the introduction of continental

know-how (National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tōkyō 2007). In this context, the tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora are not isolated cases, but configurations in which a transformation in the status of drawing becomes crystallised, now conceived as a structuring principle prior to any chromatic intervention (Asuka Historical Museum 2006).



Figure 7: Corbelled stone burial chamber (*yokoguchi-shiki sekishitsu*) of the Sakurai Chausuyama tumulus, Kofun period, Sakurai (Nara Prefecture, Japan), showing traces of red pigment on the stepped stone ceiling and wall surfaces. Digital composite reconstruction highlighting the distribution and preservation of painted areas within the chamber. (After Sakurai 2025).

The surface is first structured by a black-ink drawing that defines contours, volumes, and the composition, after which pigments are applied within these boundaries. This system relies on a set of techniques whose reconstruction makes it possible to assess the degree of preparation and planning involved. At Takamatsuzuka, the operational sequence can be divided into several stages: a preliminary

line in diluted ink marks out chromatic zones; a denser ink drawing fixes the final contours; colour is then applied, followed by a finishing stage in diluted ink that unifies the composition (Sano et al. 2009).

At Kitora, a complementary technique is added: linear incision (*sujibon*), executed directly on fresh plaster using a pointed tool before any application of pigment (Asuka Historical Museum 2007). This material guide embedded in the support was complemented by *sōshi*, a sheet of paper coated on the back with ink and *bengara*, used to transfer the preparatory drawing onto the plaster.

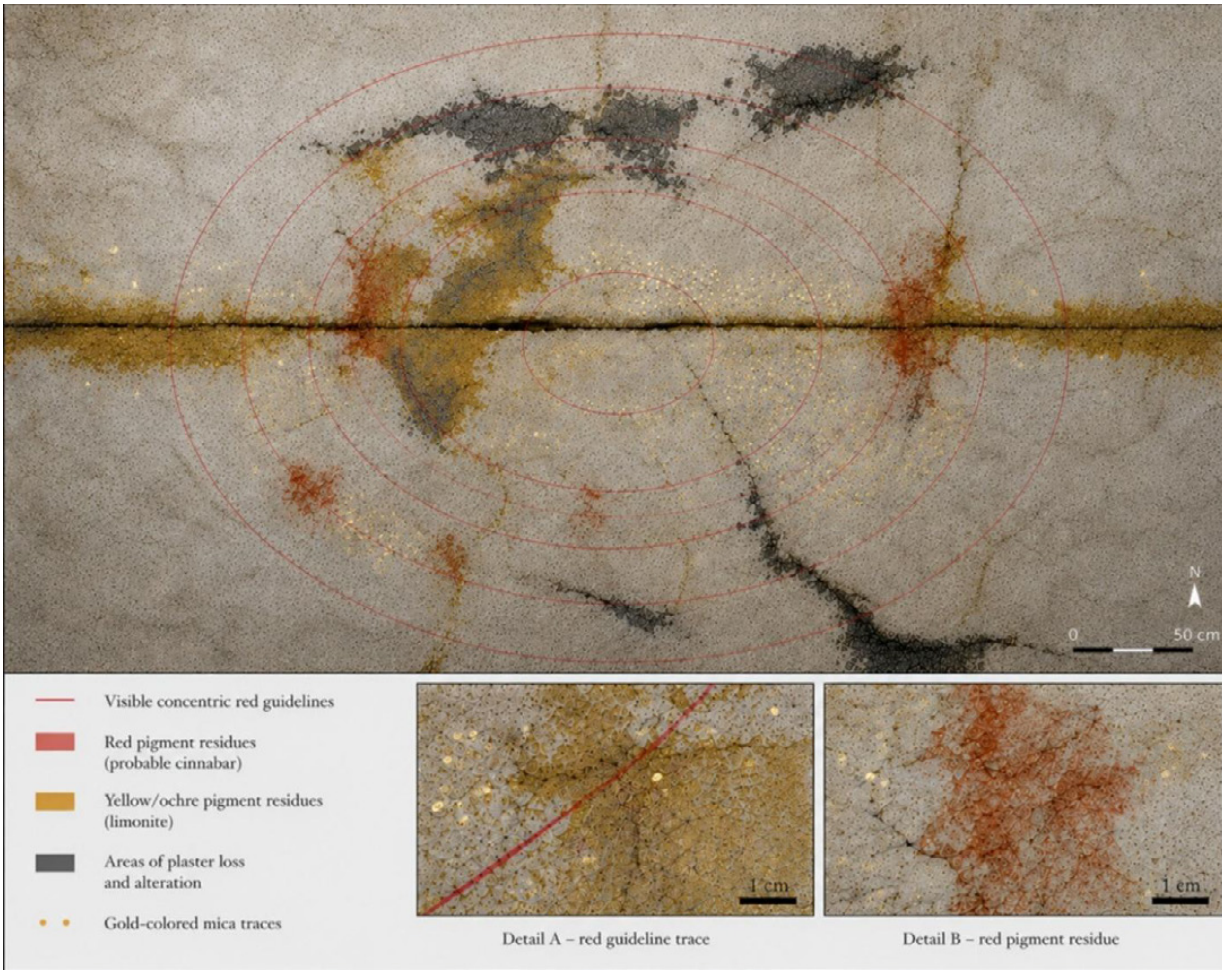

Figure 8: Star chart (*tenmon-zu*) on the ceiling of the burial chamber (*genshitsu*) of the Kitora tumulus, seventh century, Asuka (Nara Prefecture, Japan), showing concentric astronomical guidelines and surviving pigment traces around the north celestial pole. Digital interpretative reconstruction highlighting visible red linear traces, pigment residues, and areas of surface alteration. (After Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and Asuka Historical Museum).

The question of the preparatory model, the *funpon*, is central to understanding this system (Yamada 2010). Comparative studies based on digital image analysis have demonstrated that the figures of the Green Dragon and the White Tiger show part-by-part morphological correspondence, suggesting the use of a common model reversed across the walls; similar correspondences can be observed between the group figures on the east and west walls of Takamatsuzuka. For the astronomical chart at Kitora

(Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and Asuka Historical Museum 2015), the four celestial circles were drawn using a compass, the positions of the stars transferred using marking paper (*nenshi*), and circular gold leaf elements applied at each star's location (Yamamoto 2016).

This technical system points to a production process extending beyond the funerary chamber, involving preparatory work, division of labour, and advanced technical expertise. The Kondō murals at Hōryūji, preceding or contemporary with Takamatsuzuka and Kitora, reflect the same repertoire, indicating the circulation of shared techniques between temple workshops and elite tomb contexts.

Toward a Redefinition of the Relationship between Colour and Drawing

It is within this tension that the coherence of decorated tombs of the Kofun period is constructed: not in a homogeneous iconographic repertoire, but in a set of differentiated relationships between coloured matter and graphic gesture. Colour is never neutral. It unfolds according to contrasting modalities, at times as a generative principle, at others as an element strictly constrained by line, depending on the technical and spatial configurations in which it is embedded. In both cases, it contributes to the very definition of the pictorial.

What the analysis thus suggests is the existence of a pictorial system that does not rest on a fixed opposition between two regimes, but on the continuous variation of modes of articulation between colour and drawing. These regimes should be understood not as exclusive categories, but as analytical poles that account for multiple configurations, capable of recomposition according to material and technical contexts.

The body of data drawn from the corpus therefore leads to a shift in the initial question: it is no longer a matter of determining what the motifs represent, nor of considering colour as a simple complement to line, but rather of analysing the conditions of their co-constitution. The relationship between pigment and drawing thus emerges as the central operator of the Kofun decorative system, more so than iconography itself.

From this perspective, the painting of Kofun-period tombs cannot be reduced either to a unified system or to a succession of technical oppositions. It is better understood as a field of variation in which colour oscillates between different modes of material existence, always determined by its articulation with drawing. It is within this relational dynamic that its deeper coherence resides.

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PART III:

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTINENTAL CONNECTIONS

CHAPTER 9

JAPANESE DECORATED TOMBS IN A GLOBAL FRAMEWORK: A COMPARATIVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH

KAZUTAKA KAWANO[1]

*This chapter reconsiders Japanese decorated tumuli (*sōshoku kofun*) within the broader context of a comparative archaeology of funerary representation. Rather than treating them as peripheral or exceptional phenomena within Japanese Kofun culture, it argues that they should be understood as mortuary forms deeply embedded in regional communities, whose symbolic logic merits analysis as a coherent tradition. The chapter begins with a brief review of the historiography of research on decorated tumuli, together with recent developments in recording techniques and image processing, and then proposes a comparative framework based on five variables: (1) modes of human representation; (2) the balance between narrativity and decorativity; (3) hierarchical scaling; (4) relations to political centres; and (5) modes of emergence. Using this framework, decorated tomb traditions from Egypt, China, the Mediterranean, Koguryŏ (Korea), and Mesoamerica are compared with Japanese examples, especially those of Kyushu. The chapter argues that Japanese decorated tumuli are characterised by the coexistence of frontal and profile representation, the relative absence of hierarchical scaling, and pictorial programmes that tend to structure communal symbolic worlds rather than exalt a single tomb occupant. This pattern is further illuminated through comparison with north-western Iberia and southern Sumatra, where decorated burial spaces also appear to have developed through local reconfiguration under broader conditions of interaction. The chapter concludes that Japanese decorated tumuli are best understood as community-oriented mortuary spaces in which memory, ritual, and identity were materially articulated within local communities. In doing so, it offers a comparative model for integrating Japanese decorated tombs into wider discussions of death, imagery, and social order in human history.*

Keywords: *Decorated Tombs, Sōshoku Kofun, Kofun Period, Comparative Archaeology, Visual Grammar, Collective Memory, Funerary Symbolism, Kyushu*

装飾墓の比較考古学

河野一隆　（東京国立博物館）

本章は、日本の装飾古墳（sōshoku kofun）を、「装飾墓の比較考古学」という、より広くグローバルな文脈のなかで再検討するものである。装飾古墳を日本の古墳文化における周縁的あるいは例外的な現象として扱うのではなく、地域共同体に深く根ざした葬送形態として捉え、その象徴的論理を一貫した伝統として分析すべきであると論じる。まず、日本の装飾古墳研究の学史を簡潔に振り返るとともに、近年の記録技術および画像処理の進展を整理したうえで、以下の五つの変数に基づく比較の枠組みを提示する。すなわち、（1）人物表現の様式、（2）物語性と装飾性の均衡、（3）階層的表現（大小の描き分け）、（4）中心－周辺関係、（5）装飾墓の成立のあり方、である。この枠組みにもとづき、エジ

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プト、中国、地中海世界、高句麗、メソアメリカの装飾墓の伝統を、日本、とりわけ九州の事例と比較する。その結果、日本の装飾古墳は、正面観と側面観の併存、階層的表現の相対的な欠如、そして単一の被葬者を顕彰するのではなく、共同体的な象徴世界を構成する傾向をもつ図像構成によって特徴づけられると論じる。この特徴は、北西イベリアおよび南スマトラの事例との比較によって、さらに明確になる。というのも、これらの地域でも、装飾された埋葬空間が、より広域的な相互作用のもとで、地域的再編成を通じて成立・展開したと考えられるからである。本章は、日本の装飾古墳を、記憶・儀礼・アイデンティティが具体的なかたちを与えられ、共同体のなかで意味づけられる葬送空間として捉えるのが最も適切であると結論づける。そのうえで、このような理解を通して、日本の装飾墓を、人類史における死・図像・社会秩序をめぐる、より広い比較研究のなかに位置づける視角を提示する。

キーワード　装飾墓、装飾古墳、古墳時代、比較考古学、視覚文法、集合的記憶、葬送の象徴的論理、九州

Defining Decorated Tombs in Japan and the Aim of This Chapter

Painted and decorated burial monuments associated with the Japanese Kofun period have been described in English-language scholarship using a range of terms, including ‘painted tombs’ and ‘decorated tombs’. In this chapter, I use ‘decorated tombs’ as a broad comparative term, while retaining ‘decorated tumuli’ when referring more specifically to the Japanese Kofun context. This terminology preserves the archaeological distinction between mounded *kofun* and other burial forms, including horizontal rock-cut tombs and related non-mounded funerary monuments. In the present chapter, decorated tumuli (*sōshoku kofun*) refer primarily to Kofun period burial facilities in which motifs were expressed through carving (Figure 1), incision, or painting (Figure 2) on the interior and/or exterior surfaces of burial chambers (Figures 3 and 4), stone coffins, or associated stone elements. Late Kofun mural tombs such as Takamatsuzuka and Kitora Tumulus are not treated here as part of the same category in a strict typological sense; rather, they are used selectively as a comparative point of contrast to clarify what is distinctive about decorated tumuli proper. Tombs whose stone chambers or coffins were simply covered entirely in red pigment, as well as tumuli furnished with exterior sculptural elements such as *haniwa* or stone statues of humans and horses, are likewise excluded from the narrower category used here.

This chapter does not attempt an exhaustive survey of decorated tomb traditions in Japan or elsewhere. Instead, it proposes a comparative framework for repositioning Japanese decorated tumuli within a wider archaeology of funerary representation. The central question is not simply why decorated tumuli emerged, but why they developed intensively in particular regions and disappeared so rapidly. Here they are treated not as peripheral anomalies, but as regional mortuary forms endowed with a distinctive symbolic logic. In social terms, decorated tumuli flourished especially in the later Kofun period, when regional elites and local ritual communities in areas such as Kyushu (Figure 5) negotiated mortuary display in ways that were related to, but not wholly determined by, the Yamato political centre. This regional florescence coincided with a phase in which local groups increasingly articulated status, ritual authority, and supra-local affiliation through mortuary display.

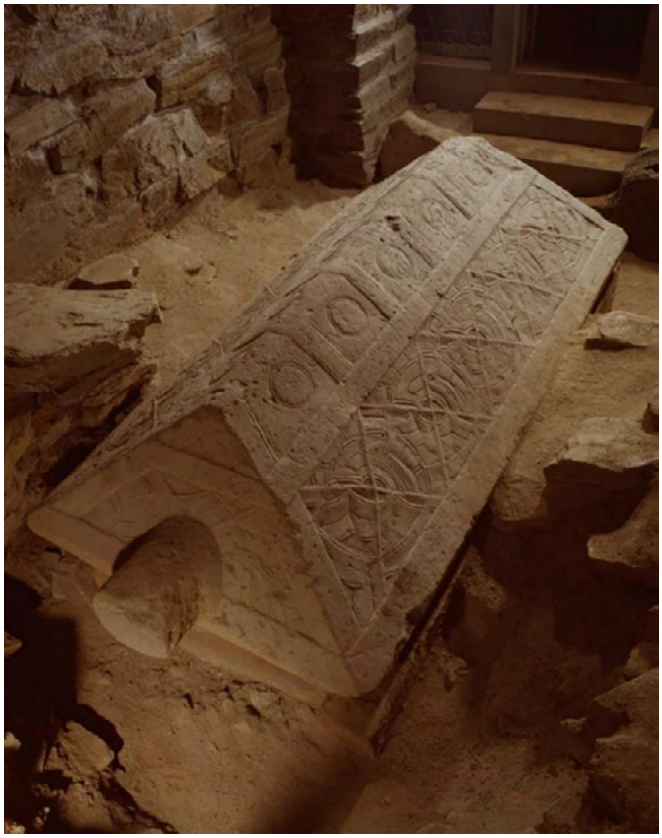

Figure 1: *Chokkomon* engraved on the stone coffin of Sekijinsan Tumulus. (Courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum)



Figure 2: Coloured mural of Mezurashizuka Tumulus. (Courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum).



Figure 3: Decorated stone partition slabs of Kamao Tumulus (Left) and Idera Tumulus (Right). (Courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum).



Figure 4: Mural type of decorated tomb of Takehara Tumulus (Left) and Hinooka Tumulus (Right). (Courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum).

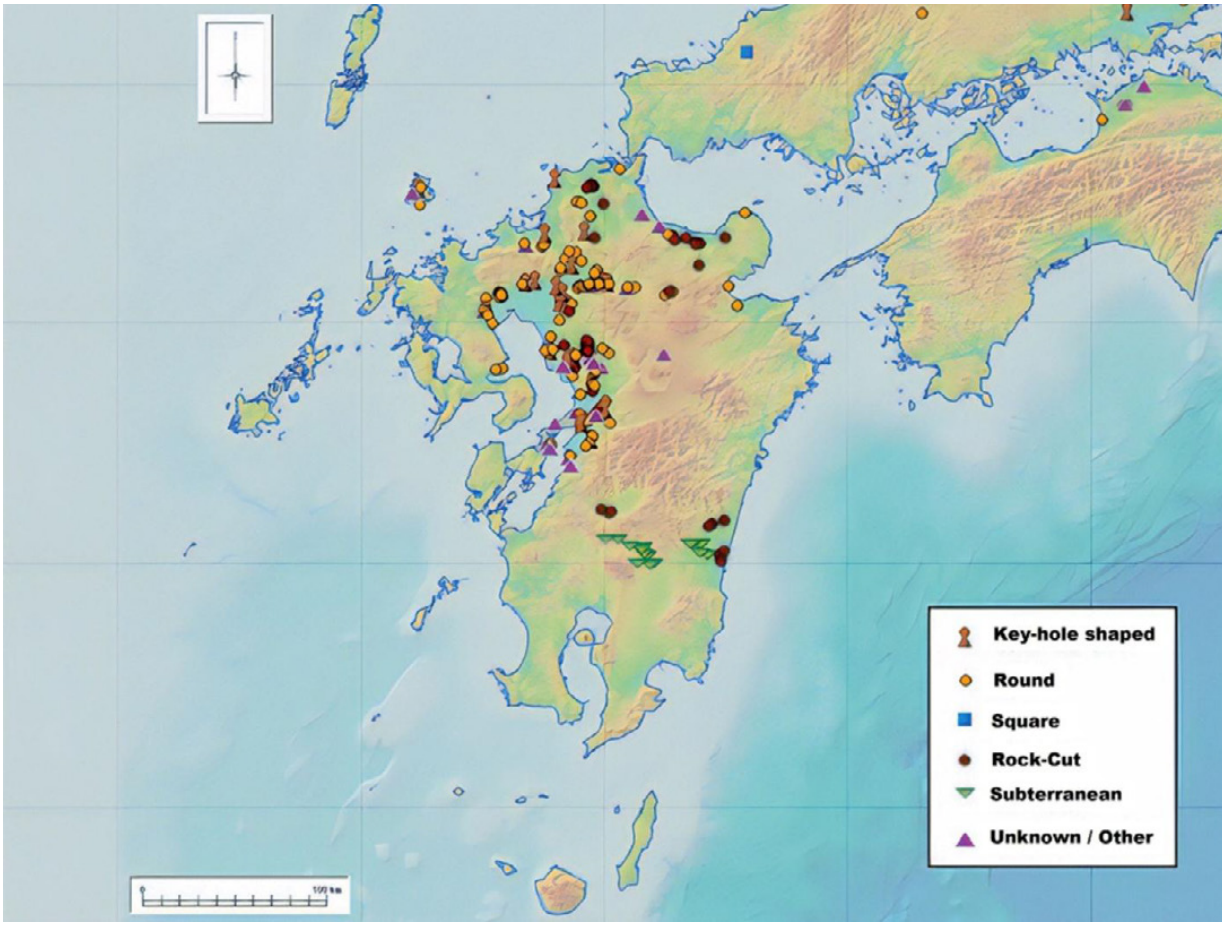

Figure 5: Distribution of decorated tombs in Kyushu. Courtesy of Japan Map Centre).

Research History, Documentation, and Methodological Scope

A Brief History of Research on Decorated Tumuli

Interest in decorated tumuli can be traced back to the Edo (Tokugawa) period (1603–1868). Antiquarians and *Kokugaku* scholars (nativist philological scholars concerned with Japan's ancient past) documented painted and incised motifs chiefly through sketches and descriptive notes. In the modern period, especially from the late nineteenth century onwards, such observations were gradually incorporated into the emerging disciplinary framework of archaeology. Systematic archaeological investigations did not fully develop until the early twentieth century, and among the most significant were the surveys undertaken by the Faculty of Letters of Kyoto Imperial University in Fukuoka and Kumamoto Prefectures. These investigations were pioneering not only for the study of decorated tumuli, but for Japanese archaeology more broadly, and they also included early experiments in pigment analysis that foreshadowed later developments in conservation science. For the historiography of research on decorated tumuli and their documentation, see especially Kobayashi (1964), Ishiyama (2009), Kawano (2022), and Kawano (2023), together with conservation-oriented discussions in Kuchitsu (2002, 2003).

The discovery of the Ōzuka Tumulus (Figure 6) in Fukuoka in 1934 marked a major turning point, prompting immediate recording and a full academic investigation. In the decades following the Second

World War, although legal frameworks for the protection of cultural properties already existed, practical systems for the rapid documentation, conservation, and management of newly discovered decorated tombs were still unevenly developed at the local level. For this reason, early post-war surveys and preservation efforts often depended heavily on the initiative of schoolteachers, local researchers, students, and civic communities.



Figure 6: Coloured mural of Ōzuka Tumulus (Front Wall). (Courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum).

The discovery of the Takehara Tumulus in 1956 further stimulated national interest, leading to a proliferation of publications, illustrative records, and preservation campaigns; public and scholarly attention was later intensified again by the discovery of the Takamatsuzuka murals in 1972. At the same time, increasing concern over pigment deterioration and environmental fluctuation underscored the urgency of conservation.

From the late 1960s onwards, preservation efforts became increasingly institutionalised. Interdisciplinary committees were established to address environmental issues, civic organisations actively monitored conservation practices, and comprehensive baseline surveys were conducted at the prefectural level, particularly in Kumamoto. As a result, research on decorated tumuli shifted decisively from descriptive archaeology towards cultural heritage science and conservation-oriented study, supported by management systems led by local boards of education and specialised institutions.

Changes in the Documentation of Decorated Tumuli

Decorated tumuli are three-dimensional structures in which both form and colour are essential sources of information. Nevertheless, early documentation often failed to record colour accurately. Edo-period sketches, although imprecise, are now invaluable for reconstructing motifs that have since disappeared. A major methodological transformation occurred in the early twentieth century, when archaeological recording practices rapidly matured. Early surveys by Kyoto Imperial University gradually improved from partial plans and selective copying to systematic documentation integrating chamber structure, surrounding topography, and colour information. By the late 1930s, documentation had reached a level sufficient for modern archaeological analysis, establishing standards that continue to influence current practice. Parallel to architectural documentation, decorated tumuli were also recorded through artistic copying. In addition to early efforts associated with the discovery of the Ōzuka Tumulus, the long-term contributions of Kusaka Hakkō were particularly significant. From the mid-1950s onwards, Kusaka devoted himself to copying decorated tumuli and rock-cut tombs across northern and central Kyushu and eastern Japan, producing an indispensable visual archive that preserves information no longer observable in situ.

Digital Documentation and Image Processing



Figure 7: Comparison between digital and manual measurements at the Shimobaba Tumulus. (Composite figure compiled by the author).

Documentation based on manual measurement and hand copying inevitably involves error and subjectivity. Digital measurement technologies, by contrast, make it possible to minimise error (Figure 7), construct three-dimensional models, and preserve corrected colour data, thereby recording burial chambers as stable reference points for future study.

A major challenge in the study of decorated tombs is the progressive fading of mural imagery. Over time, pictorial visibility deteriorates as a result of multiple factors, including exposure to ultraviolet and infrared radiation, the degradation of organic components caused by fluctuations in temperature and humidity, and the accumulation of dust and other surface contaminants. In this context, Decorrelation Stretch is particularly useful. Decorrelation stretch is a digital image-enhancement technique that amplifies subtle chromatic differences by transforming correlated colour information. In the study of decorated tombs, it allows faint motifs to become more visible without physically affecting the painted surface, and is therefore especially valuable in the analysis of murals that have suffered progressive fading (Figure 8).

Decorated tumuli are also subject to continual change caused by natural disasters, environmental fluctuation, and biological deterioration. The 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake demonstrated the vulnerability of these sites and underscored the value of three-dimensional digital records for monitoring gradual change. Beyond conservation, such data open new analytical perspectives by making it possible to compare pictorial composition, colour distribution, and spatial arrangement with greater precision than was previously possible (Figure 9).

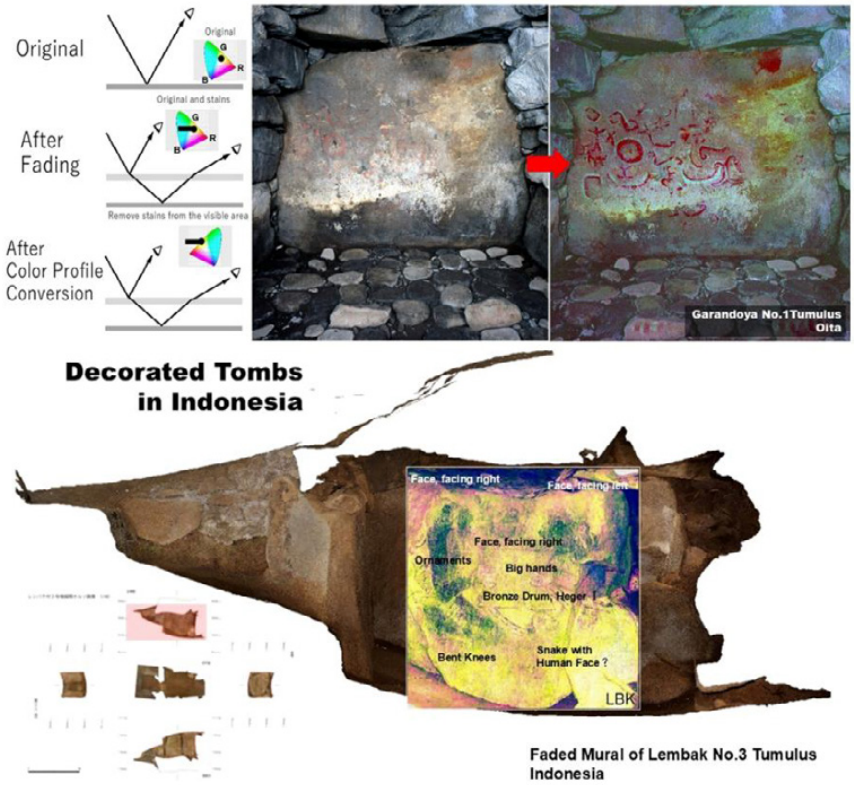

Figure 8: Principles of DStretch and the restoration of mural paintings. Japan: Garandoya Tumulus (Upper); Indonesia: Lembak Tomb No. 3 (Lower). (Composite figure compiled by the author, courtesy of Kyushu Historical Museum and TOPPEN Co., Ltd.)



Figure 9: Digital reconstruction of Ōzuka Tumulus (at the time of construction). (Image courtesy of the Ikeuchi Laboratory, The University of Tokyo, and TOPPAN Inc).

Methodological Note: Materials, Variables, and Comparative Scope

The comparative discussion developed in this chapter is based on a deliberately selective body of material rather than an exhaustive global inventory. The principal material considered here consists of decorated tumuli from the Japanese archipelago in the narrower archaeological sense outlined above. Comparative cases from other regions were selected according to four criteria: (1) the presence of visually articulated funerary rites within burial spaces; (2) the availability of published archaeological documentation; (3) the preservation of sufficient imagery to permit comparison; and (4) their relevance for clarifying similarities and differences in the visual structuring of mortuary space. The analysis focuses on a limited number of comparative variables: (1) modes of human representation, especially frontal, profile, or mixed conventions; (2) the balance between narrative and decorative emphasis; (3) the presence or absence of hierarchical scaling among human figures; (4) the relationship between decorated burial traditions and political centres; and (5) the mode by which decorated tombs emerged, whether through direct transmission, stimulus diffusion, or local reconfiguration. These variables are not intended as a rigid universal taxonomy, but as a heuristic framework for cross-cultural comparison.

The last section of this chapter presents two case studies—north-western Iberia and southern Sumatra—not because they are historically connected to the Japanese case, but because they provide analytically useful examples of decorated tomb traditions that appear to have emerged through local reconfiguration rather than through direct architectural or iconographic transplantation.

A Comparative Horizon: Major Traditions of Decorated Tombs

The following overview is intended as a comparative horizon rather than a comprehensive synthesis of all decorated tomb traditions. For each region, only those examples most relevant to the analytical questions of this chapter are highlighted. Dates are provided in approximate form in order to orient readers unfamiliar with the chronological frameworks of the regions concerned.

Egypt

The earliest widely-recognised Egyptian tomb with painted wall decoration is Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis (Figure 10) in Upper Egypt, usually dated to the Naqada II period, especially Naqada IIC (c. 3500–3300 BCE). This brick-built chamber, coated internally and painted with scenes including boats, animals, and conflict imagery, is often regarded as a key early example of funerary painting in the Nile Valley (Case and Payne 1962; Kemp 1973; Wengrow 2006). The emergence of this tradition is broadly contemporary with other forms of decorated material culture, including Naqada II painted pottery, and has long been discussed in relation to expanding interregional contacts and the symbolic consolidation of elite power.

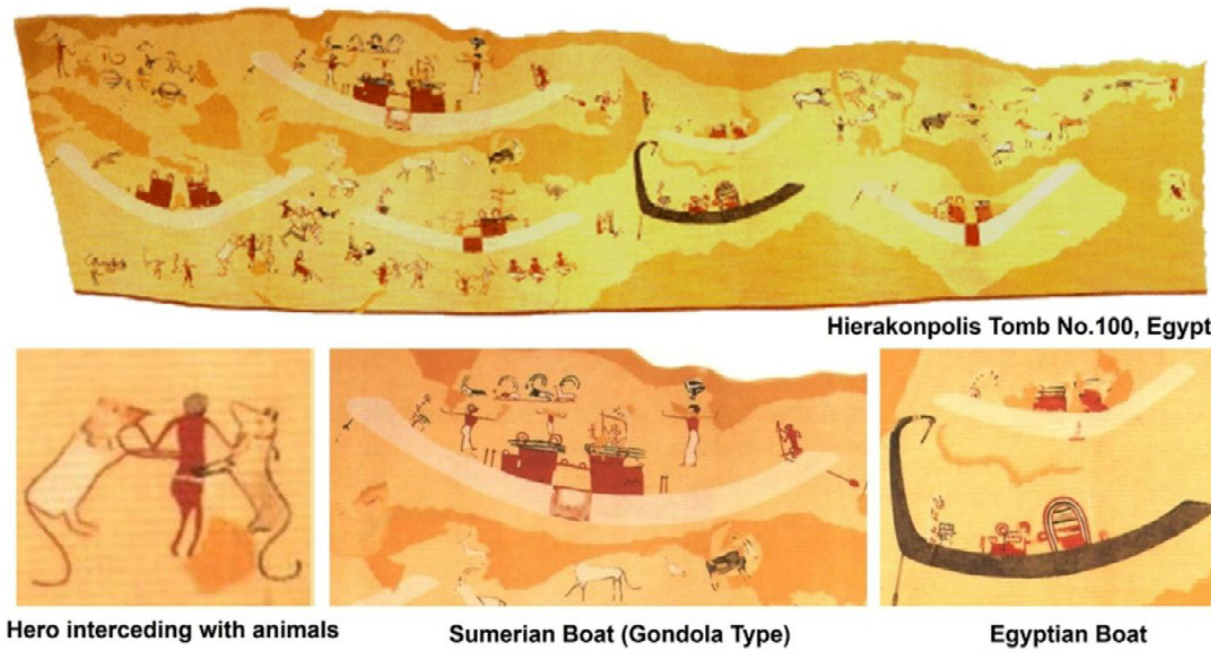

Figure 10: Coloured mural on Hierakonpolis No.100 Tomb (Restoration). (Source: courtesy of Leeman 2019).

Across later Egyptian history, decorated burial spaces developed unevenly rather than in a simple linear progression. In the Early Dynastic period (c. 3100–2686 BCE), mastaba tombs and elite funerary enclosures at sites such as Saqqara elaborated architectural and symbolic forms connected to royal authority. During the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BCE), wall decoration in elite tombs became increasingly formalised, often depicting offering scenes, agricultural labour, craft production, and the idealised life of the deceased, while royal pyramid chambers remained comparatively restrained until

the appearance of Pyramid Texts from the Fifth Dynasty onwards. In the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1070 BCE), tomb architecture became more modest in scale, yet pictorial programmes grew increasingly complex, integrating afterlife narratives, divine iconography, and funerary liturgy (Hartwig 2004; Taylor 2010). Taken together, these developments suggest that in Egypt decorated burial spaces were closely tied to elite strategies of expressing cosmology, status, and the ordered relationship between the deceased and the afterlife. Mortuary imagery thus functioned not simply as embellishment, but as part of a broader ideological apparatus linking tomb owner, social hierarchy, and sacred order. In social terms, the visual programme embedded the deceased within a strongly ordered social-cosmic hierarchy. This broader representational logic may have influenced later mural traditions in parts of the Mediterranean world (Figure 11).

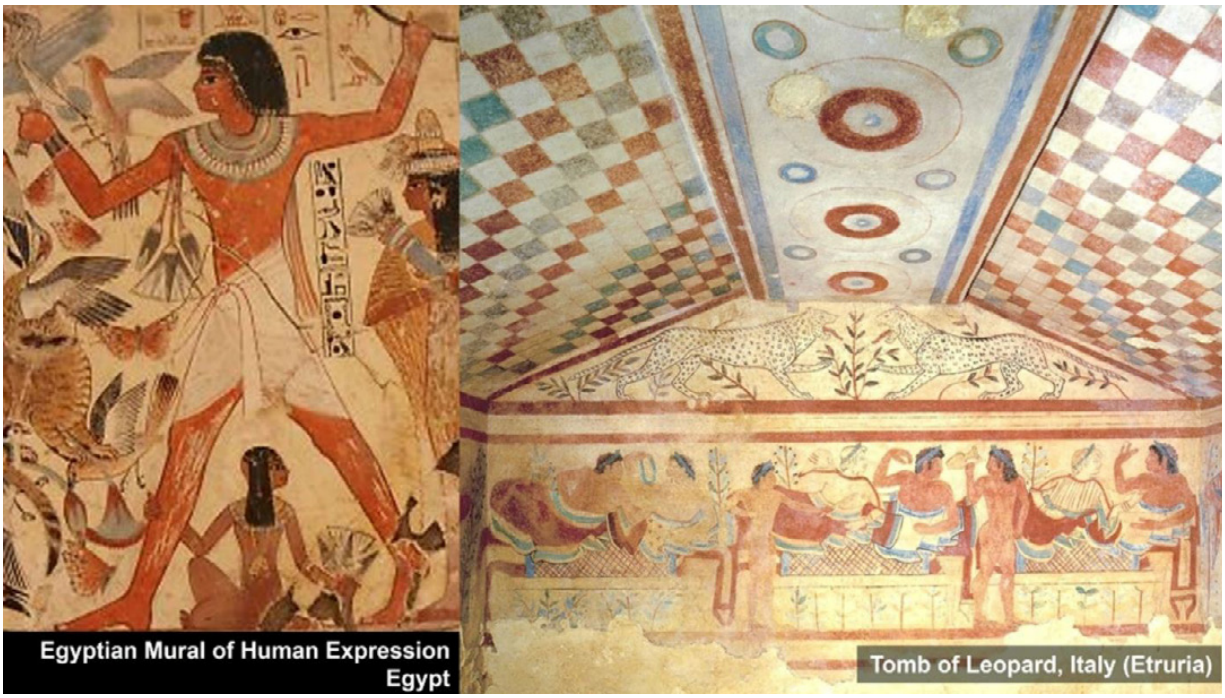

Figure 11: Egyptian tradition of human expression (Left: Egypt, Right: Etruria). (Left image courtesy of the British Museum, London; right image photograph by the author).

China

In China, tendencies towards differentiated and symbolically elaborated burial can already be observed in Neolithic contexts such as Hongshan (c. 4700–2900 BCE) and Liangzhu (c. 3300–2300 BCE), where prestige grave goods, jades, and monumental settings indicate the growing importance of funerary display. However, richly articulated decorated tomb interiors appear more clearly in later periods. In the Shang period, especially at Yinxu (thirteenth to eleventh centuries BCE), large royal tombs expressed hierarchy primarily through bronze ritual vessels and sacrificial assemblages rather than through extensive mural programmes. By the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), elite burials such as that of Marquis Yi of Zeng (d. 433 BCE) reveal increasingly elaborate visual and material environments, including lacquer-painted coffins and highly structured funerary assemblages (Hubei Provincial Museum 1989; Cook 2006). From the Han period (206 BCE–220 AD) onwards, decorated burial spaces became much more prominent in several regions, with painted tombs, stone-relief tombs, and brick-

chamber tombs displaying processions, cosmological imagery, architectural simulation, and scenes of elite life. Such developments continued into the periods of division, including the Northern and Southern Dynasties (third to sixth centuries AD), when funerary imagery could combine narrative, ritual, and cosmological themes in increasingly complex ways (Wu 1989; Steinhardt 2005; Lewis 2006).

It is also noteworthy that, in China, fully-developed painted or image-rich tomb interiors emerged historically in specific contexts rather than representing a timeless feature of burial practice. Their development should therefore be understood as a historically situated phenomenon associated with changing modes of elite display, ritual representation, and the monumentalisation of the tomb owner. In comparative terms, the Chinese tradition is especially important because it frequently privileges frontal or near-frontal authority figures, marked scale hierarchies, and an explicitly ordered social world (Figure 12). The tomb thus often operates as an extension of elite order rather than as a merely symbolic interior.



Figure 12: Chinese tradition of human expression (reconstruction of mural in mausoleum of princess Yongtai). (Photograph courtesy of Noboru Kobori).

The Mediterranean

In the Mediterranean world, decorated tombs developed in a range of historically distinct contexts rather than as a single unified tradition. In Etruria, especially at Tarquinia and Cerveteri, painted and relief-decorated tombs (Figure 13) flourished from the Archaic through Hellenistic periods (roughly seventh to third centuries BCE). These monuments frequently combine banquet scenes, dancers, musicians, athletic imagery, processions, and architectural simulation, thereby constructing the tomb as an inhabited or performative environment rather than as a purely sealed funerary container

(Steingräber 1986; Haynes 2000). In some cases, the back wall or gable zone preserves symbolic architectural motifs that remain remarkably persistent over time.



Figure 13: Relief tomb in Banditaccia cemetery in Cerveteri, Etruria. (Photograph by the author).

Comparable developments can also be seen in Macedonia, particularly in the fourth and third centuries BCE, where tomb painting often includes figured façades, elite hunting scenes, and royal or aristocratic iconography. These traditions are closely connected to wider networks of exchange in the Greek world, although it is more precise to speak of Greek settlements or *apoikiai* in regions such as southern Italy. Across these Mediterranean cases, decorated tombs often combine architectural simulation, banquet imagery, and scenes of ritual or aristocratic life. Such programmes imply that the tomb was conceived not only as a place of burial, but also as a representational environment in which memory, lineage, and social role were visually staged (Andronikos 1984; Miller 1993; Steingräber 1986).

In comparative terms, the Mediterranean evidence is significant because it often privileges profile-based figurative traditions, narrative scenes, and socially recognisable roles without always relying on the extreme scale hierarchies typical of some East Asian contexts. This makes it especially useful for distinguishing between tombs that centre political order and those that stage commemorative sociability. Socially, these pictorial programmes often render lineage, status, and convivial remembrance visible without always isolating a single sovereign figure.

Koguryŏ and Related East Asian Traditions

In East Asia, one of the most important traditions of decorated tombs is that of Koguryŏ, whose mural tombs flourished especially between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. These tombs, distributed in present-day north-east China and the Korean peninsula, include chamber tombs with painted walls depicting processions, hunting scenes, architectural features, mythological beings, and the Four Guardian Deities. Anak Tomb No. 3 is among the best-known examples, notable for its elaborate figural programme and the marked scale distinction between principal and subordinate figures (Chosŏn Hwagbo-sa 1985; Nelson 1993). Koguryŏ is particularly important in comparative perspective because its murals combine strong narrative content with highly structured representations of authority, dress, and rank. Principal figures are often depicted at a larger scale and in more commanding visual positions, while attendants, servants, and secondary figures occupy subordinate zones. The pictorial system therefore makes social hierarchy visible in a direct and formalised way. At the same time, architectural motifs and cosmological beings integrate the deceased into a wider sacred and political order.

Later East Asian traditions, including Liao (Khitan) tombs, also developed mural programmes featuring processions, portraits, and sacred guardians, often within architecturally elaborate subterranean spaces. In this broader East Asian context, decorated tombs frequently combine elite personhood, political order, and cosmological representation in ways that differ substantially from Japanese decorated tumuli. For the present chapter, Koguryŏ provides a useful contrast with Japanese decorated tumuli. Whereas the Koguryŏ murals often centre elite personhood and hierarchical display, Japanese decorated tumuli more often disperse emphasis across symbolic motifs, narrative fragments, and non-hierarchical human representation. This difference is crucial to the argument developed below, because it suggests contrasting ways of materialising authority, memory, and mortuary order.

Maya / Mesoamerica

In Mesoamerica, decorated tombs are attested in several regions and periods (Figure 14), especially among the Maya from the Late Preclassic through the Classic period (c. 300 BCE–900 AD). At sites such as Río Azul in Guatemala, painted tombs with red plaster surfaces, hieroglyphic texts, and elite burial assemblages reveal strong connections between mortuary space, dynastic legitimacy, and wider political networks, especially in the Early Classic period (Adams 1999; Houston and Stuart 1998). At Palenque, the tomb of K'inich Janaab' Pakal combines monumental architecture, carved imagery, and cosmological symbolism in a way that binds royal death to sacred kingship (Ruz Lhuillier 1973; Miller and Martin 2004). Monte Albán in Oaxaca offers additional examples in which frontal and profile representation coexist within funerary art, often in relation to sacred or dynastic themes (Marcus and Flannery 1996).

What is striking in many Mesoamerican cases is the coexistence of frontal and profile representation, often distributed according to spatial or symbolic logic rather than according to a single rigid rule. Human and divine figures may occupy different walls or zones of the burial chamber, and imagery frequently mediates between rulership, ancestry, and cosmological orientation. Hierarchical differentiation is often present in elite contexts, but it is expressed within a broader symbolic field in which sacred and dynastic significance remain inseparable.

In comparative terms, Mesoamerican decorated tombs demonstrate that the coexistence of frontal and profile representation does not necessarily imply the absence of social hierarchy. This is an important caution for the present argument. The Japanese case is distinctive not simply because it permits both modes, but because this coexistence is combined with generally weak hierarchical scaling and a reduced

emphasis on the singular tomb owner. In other words, similar representational flexibility may support very different social logics depending on the broader mortuary programme.



Figure 14: Maya Tradition of human expression. Tomb No. 104 at Monte Albán (left); and the decorated tomb at Río Azul (right). (Left image: reconstruction model in the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, photographed by the author; right image: reproduced from Adams 1999).

Towards a Visual Grammar of Decorated Tombs

In this chapter, the expression 'visual grammar' is used heuristically rather than in the sense of a fixed or universal rule system. It refers to recurrent constraints and patterned choices in funerary representation, especially viewpoint, compositional hierarchy, and the balance between narrative and decorative motifs—through which relationships between the dead, the living, and the wider community are visually structured. The term is therefore intended as an analytical device for comparison, not as a claim that all traditions share a common semiotic system (Table 1).

The related concept of collective memory is used here in the sense developed by Maurice Halbwachs and later elaborated in discussions of cultural memory, especially by Jan and Aleida Assmann (Halbwachs 1992; J. Assmann 2011; A. Assmann 2011). It refers not to individual recollection, but to socially structured forms of remembering that are materialised through ritual practice, spatial settings, and visual media. Decorated tombs are relevant in this respect because they may preserve, organise, and reactivate shared understandings of ancestry, death, and communal order (Bradley 1998).

The notion of 'independent emergence' used in this chapter should not be understood as implying cultural isolation. Rather, it refers to cases in which decorated burial traditions developed without the direct transplantation of an entire architectural or iconographic template, even where broader symbolic stimuli circulated through long-distance contact, exchange, or stimulus diffusion. The

concept is therefore intended to capture local reconfiguration under conditions of interaction, rather than autonomous invention in a strict sense (Trigger 2003; Renfrew and Bahn 2020; Bellwood 2017).

Table 1: Comparative variables in major decorated tomb traditions. Note: These categories are intended as analytical tendencies rather than rigid typologies. Substantial regional and chronological variation exists within each tradition.

Tradition	Human representation	Narrative / decorative emphasis	Hierarchical scaling	Relation to political centre	Mode of emergence
Egypt	Predominantly profile-based composite convention	Strong narrative and cosmological programmes	Present	Core civilisational centres	Long internal development
China	Frontal or near-frontal (three-quarter conventions) emphasis; strict profile often avoided	Narrative, ritual, processional	Present	Core civilisational centres	Long internal development
Koguryŏ and **Liao** (Khitan)	Near-frontal and three-quarter conventions	Narrative and elite display	Present	State-level regional centre	Transmission and transformation
Japan (decorated tumuli)	Frontal and profile coexist across sites and media	Mixed; narrative and decorative	Generally absent or weak	Largely regional/peripheral to Yamato centre	Local reconfiguration under external stimuli
Japan (mural tombs)	Strong continental influence; profile often avoided	Courtly / cosmological	More formalised	Closer to political core	Continental transmission
Etruria	Mixed, often profile-based	Narrative and architectural simulation	Usually weak	Regional aristocratic centres	Mediterranean interaction
Maya / Oaxaca	Frontal and profile coexist	Varies; often dynastic / sacred	Often present in elite contexts	Regional ceremonial centres	Internal development
North-western Iberia	Predominantly non-figural / abstract	Decorative-symbolic	Not applicable or absent	No major civilisational centre	Local development under broad stimuli
Southern Sumatra (Pasemah)	Mixed human-animal and abstract imagery	Symbolic / narrative hybrid	Weak or absent	Regional megalithic landscape	Local reconfiguration under interaction

Human Representation: Frontal View, Profile View, or Coexistence?

To clarify regional variability in decorated tomb traditions, this section focuses on core areas in which funerary painting was especially well developed and compares the representational rules governing human figures.



Figure 15: Three traditions of decorated tomb's mural (upper: Mediterranean; middle: China; lower: Maya). (Composite figure compiled by the author from photographs by the author and multiple contributors).

First, in Egyptian figurative representation, the face is typically shown in profile, while the upper body is rendered frontally and the lower body in profile. This composite convention shaped not only Egyptian tomb painting but also influenced wider visual traditions in parts of the Mediterranean (Robins 1997; Wilkinson 1992; Steingräber 1986). Large-scale Greek wall painting has rarely survived, yet related practices may be inferred through Etruscan and south Italian evidence (Steingräber 1986; Haynes 2000). The important point here is that the depiction of a figure's frontality towards the viewer is subject to strict constraints, and figures are situated within a highly formalised representational order (Robins 1997; Wilkinson 1992).

By contrast, Chinese funerary imagery is characterised by a stronger tendency to avoid strict profile in the representation of elite or principal figures. The tomb owner is often depicted frontally or in a near-frontal, three-quarter mode, and spatial hierarchy is reinforced through dress, posture, and scale (Wu 1989; Ledderose 2000). The mural tombs of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora in Japan, although not treated here as part of the same category as decorated tumuli proper, clearly participate in this continental visual logic (Barnes 2007; Mizoguchi 2013).

Finally, in Mesoamerica, profile and frontal views frequently coexist, often according to spatial or symbolic distribution rather than a single rigid rule. The same may be said, in a different way, of Japanese decorated tumuli, where frontal and profile modes appear across the broader corpus (Miller and Taube 1993; Coe and Koontz 2013; Kidder 2007). What matters here is not that every tradition can be reduced to a single formal rule, but that recurring preferences in human depiction help structure relations of presence, authority, and distance (Miller and Taube 1993; Bradley 1998).

Arranged comparatively, the following broad tendencies may be observed (Figure 15):

1. Avoidance of frontal view: Egypt, Nubia, parts of the Mediterranean
2. Avoidance of strict profile: China, Koguryŏ, Liao, Japan (mural tombs)
3. Coexistence of frontal and profile: Japan (decorated tumuli), Oaxaca, Maya, Pasemah

In the case of Japanese decorated tumuli, the coexistence of frontal and profile views should not be understood as a rigid rule within a single monument, but as a regional and diachronic pattern observable across multiple sites and media (Kidder 2007; Barnes 2007). Such 'frontal/profile' tendencies are not merely technical conventions. They may function as part of a visual grammar that structures the relationship between the dead, the living, and the community. A frontal view, by directly addressing the viewer (Hodder 1982), tends to evoke presence; a profile view, by diverting the gaze, can place a figure within narrative, processional order, or symbolic distance (Robins 1997).

Narrative or Decorative Emphasis?

A second analytical axis concerns whether the pictorial programme is primarily narrative in orientation or decorative in emphasis. Narrative themes combine human figures with animals, plants, equipment, or architectural settings to convey relatively high semantic density. Decorative themes, by contrast, are dominated by geometric patterns, repetitive motifs, and symbolic boundary-making (Bradley 1998; Hodder 1982).

Narrative programmes are strongly represented in Egypt, parts of the Mediterranean, Koguryŏ, and many Mesoamerican cases, where imagery often communicates status, ritual action, or cosmological order (Robins 1997; Steingräber 1986; Barnes 2007; Coe and Koontz 2013). Decorative emphasis is more characteristic of regions in which geometric or abstract patterning dominates, as in parts of Atlantic

Europe and some megalithic traditions (Shee Twohig 1981; Bradley 1998; Scarre 2011). Japanese decorated tumuli occupy an intermediate position. Some monuments, particularly in Kyushu, display clearly narrative scenes involving boats, weapons, horses, or human figures. Others remain predominantly geometric or emblematic (Kidder 2007; Barnes 2007). This mixture is significant. It suggests that decorated tumuli could function both as ritual boundaries and as spaces of visual storytelling in which the dead were related to community, memory, and symbolic order.

Is Hierarchy Expressed Through Scale?

A third point of comparison concerns whether human figures are differentiated in size according to status hierarchies. In Koguryŏ mural tombs, the tomb owner and spouse may be depicted significantly larger than attendants, making hierarchy visually explicit (Barnes 2007; Nelson 1993; Kawano 2023). Comparable strategies are common in China and in a number of elite funerary traditions elsewhere (Wu 1989; Ledderose 2000).

By contrast, Etruscan and some other Mediterranean tombs often depict multiple figures at relatively comparable scale, even when social distinction is still conveyed through posture, placement, or setting (Steingräber 1986; Haynes 2000). Japanese decorated tumuli likewise frequently lack clear hierarchical scaling. In the back-wall imagery of the Gorōyama Tumulus, for example, it is not possible to identify the tomb occupant simply through size differentiation (Kidder 2007; Kawano 2023;).

This observation should not be taken to imply a deterministic relationship between pictorial conventions and social structure. Rather, the comparison suggests that the degree of institutional standardisation surrounding mortuary practice may affect which kinds of visual solutions become dominant (Trigger 2003). In strongly centralised settings, decorated tombs are more likely to reproduce formalised hierarchies and orthodox iconographies, whereas in regions where local ritual traditions retained greater autonomy, burial imagery may have allowed more scope for communal, narrative, or cosmological experimentation.

Taking these distinctions together—human representation, thematic orientation, and hierarchical scaling—decorated tomb traditions can be grouped into broad comparative lineages without implying rigid typologies or linear diffusion (Figure 16):

1. Egypt and related Mediterranean traditions

2. China and related East Asian mural traditions

3. Mesoamerican traditions, especially those represented by Maya and Oaxaca mural traditions

4. Locally reconfigured traditions outside major civilisational centres, including Japanese decorated tumuli, north-western Iberia, and southern Sumatra

These groupings are offered not as definitive classifications, but as analytical models that clarify dominant tendencies and make the Japanese case legible within a wider comparative frame (Trigger 2003; Renfrew and Bahn 2020).

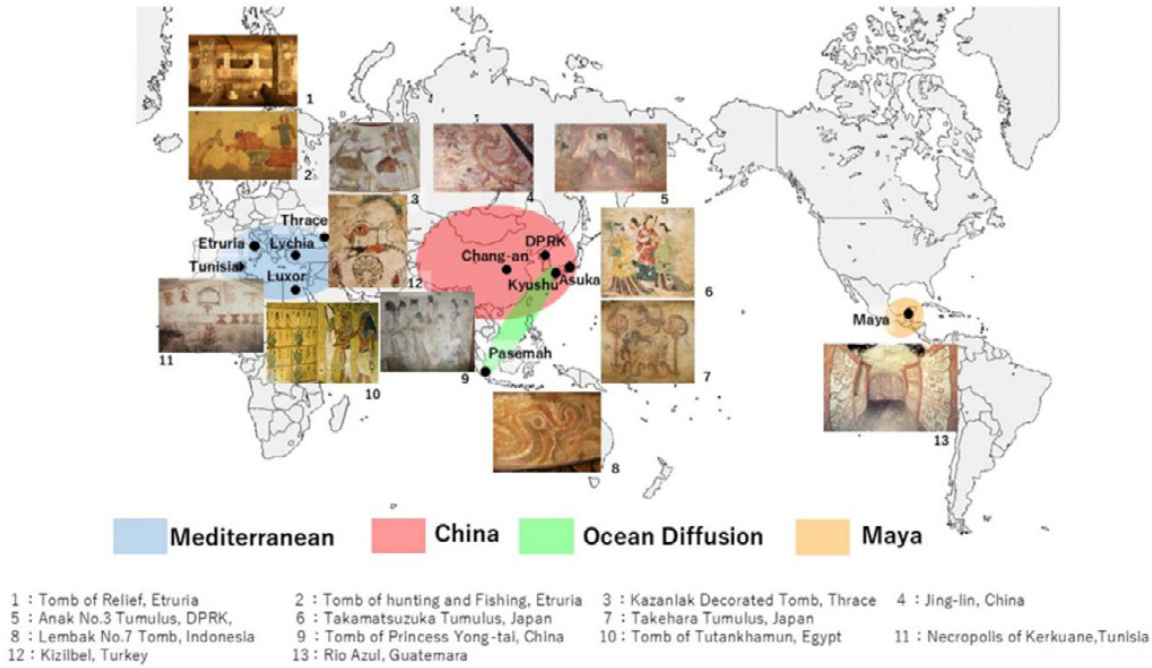

Figure 16: Four traditions of decorated tombs from the perspective of human history.

Independent Emergence and Local Reconfiguration

The two case studies discussed in this section are not presented as historical sources for Japanese decorated tumuli. Rather, they are examined as analytically comparable cases in which decorated burial spaces appear to have emerged through local reconfiguration under conditions of wider interaction. They therefore provide a useful comparative perspective on how mortuary imagery can develop outside the major centres that dominate conventional narratives of civilisation (Renfrew and Bahn 2020).

The Emergence of Decorated Dolmens in North-western Iberia

In Neolithic Europe, megalithic traditions produced a range of monuments in which the stones used to form chamber tombs themselves bore decoration. Well-known cases include Newgrange in Ireland (Figure 17), Gavrinis in Brittany, and Table des Marchands in Locmariaquer, where engraved spirals, arcs, and bent linear motifs were integrated into passage-grave architecture (O'Kelly 1982; Shee Twohig 1981; Le Roux 2006). Among these traditions, north-western Iberia (Figure 18) is especially distinctive because some monuments combined incision and carving with mineral-based pigments (Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 1998; Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002).



Figure 17: Engraving stone in Newgrange Dolmen, Ireland. (Courtesy of Noboru Kobori).

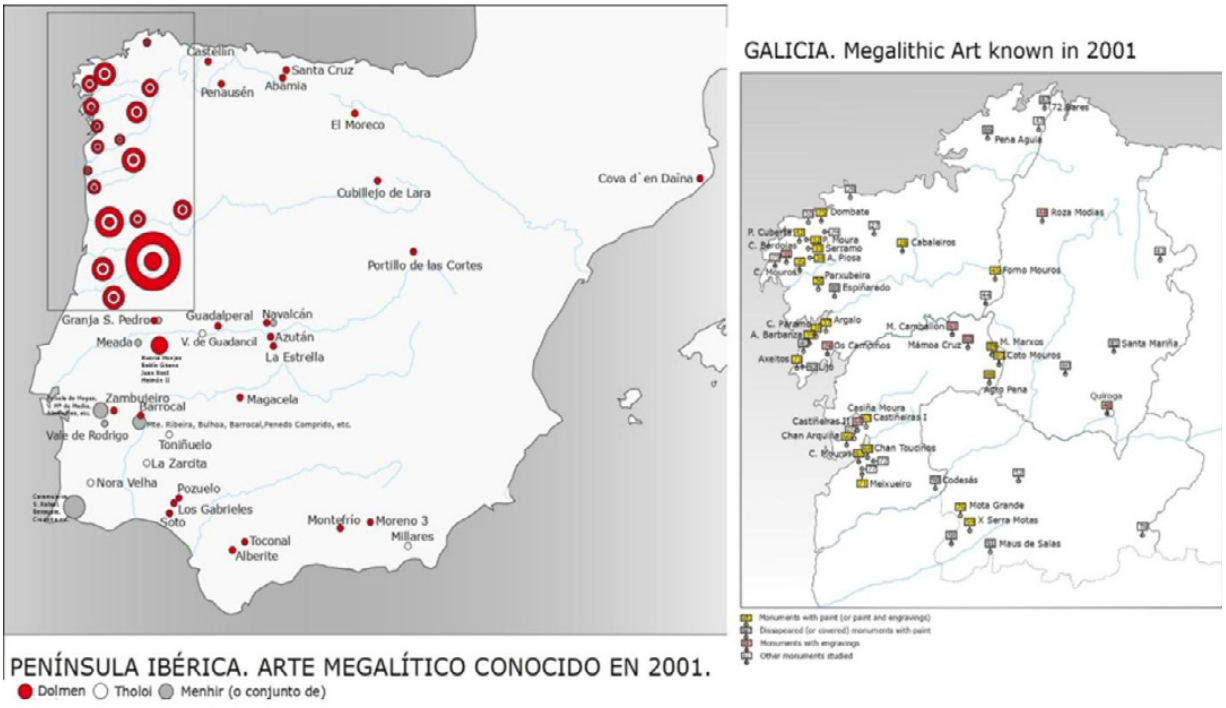

Figure 18: Megalithic art in Northwest Iberian Peninsula. (Image courtesy of F. Carrera Ramírez).

Neolithic settlement was established in this region during the early fifth millennium BCE, and by the fourth millennium BCE a substantial megalithic tradition had developed (Scarre 2011; Renfrew and Bahn 2020). Decorated tombs formed part of a locally specific megalithic visual culture in which chamber walls and orthostats became surfaces for symbolic articulation (Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002). The Dombate Dolmen in Galicia is among the best-known examples (Figure 19). Excavations undertaken between 1987 and 1989 revealed red and black painted motifs—diagonal lattices and rows of dots—applied over a white clay ground (Bello Diéguez 1994; Carrera Ramírez and Fábregas Valcarce 2002). The monument underwent multiple phases of construction, modification, and reuse between the late fourth and early third millennia BCE (Bello Diéguez 1994; Mañana-Borrazás 2003). It preserves both engraved decoration that appears to predate the completed chamber and painted imagery added after construction, suggesting a complex history in which the monument accumulated symbolic layers over time (Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002).

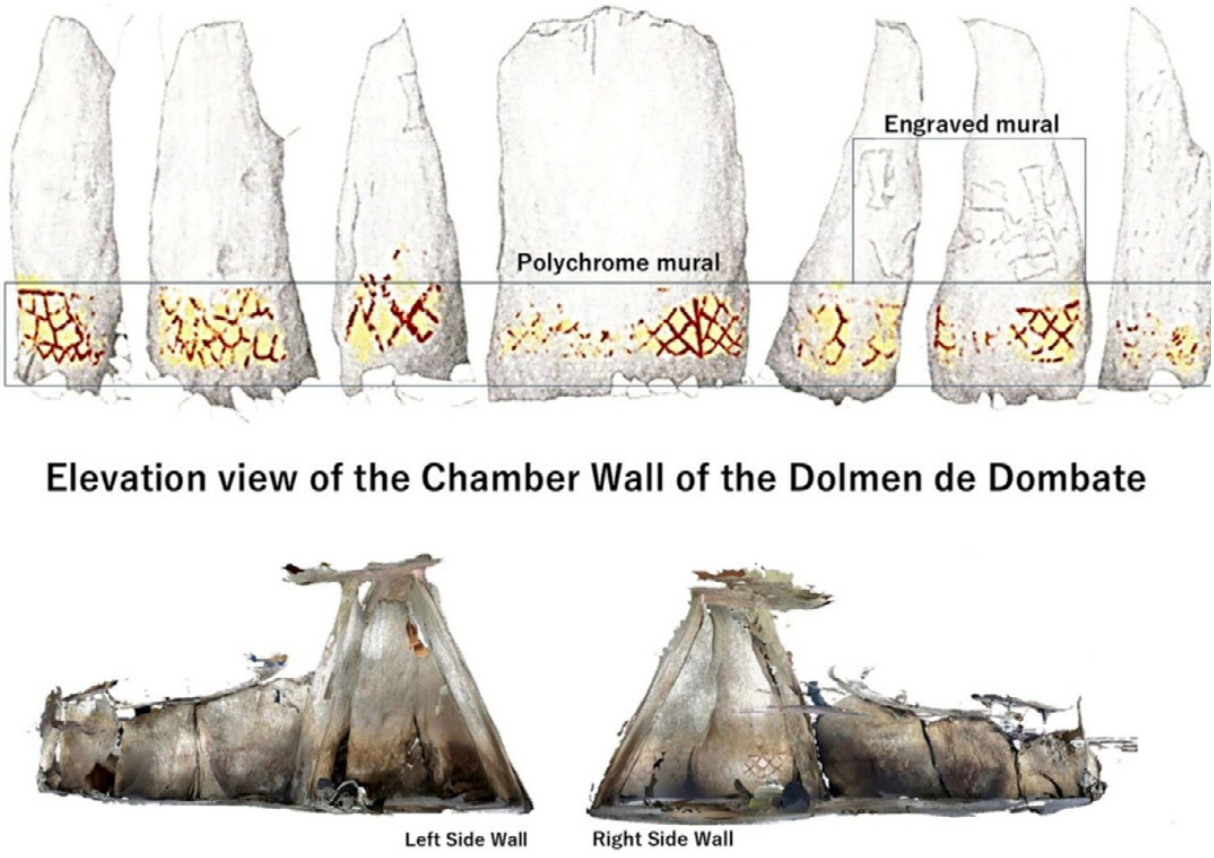

Figure 19: Coloured mural of Dombate Dolmen. (Adapted by the author from Bello Diéguez et al. 1997).

The Antelas Dolmen in central Portugal represents one of the best-preserved painted dolmens in prehistoric Europe (Leisner and Leisner 1951; Jorge 1999). Its chamber walls are painted primarily in red, black, and white, featuring rectangles, vertical zigzag motifs, and abstract symbolic compositions that have often been interpreted in relation to cosmology and ritual movement (Leisner and Leisner 1951; Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002). The chamber appears to have functioned not simply as a place of burial, but as a carefully constructed interior in which life, death, and cosmic order were made present through colour and pattern.

The Emergence of Decorated Tombs in Southern Sumatra

In southern Sumatra, decorated tombs are concentrated on the Pasemah Plateau around the foothills of Mount Dempo. Within this landscape, painted tombs coexist with dolmens, menhirs, stone statues, chamber tombs, and rock carvings, and should be understood as one element within a wider regional megalithic complex rather than as isolated phenomena (Van der Hoop 1932; Triwurjani 2013; Bellwood 2017).



Figure 20: Makara in Lembak No7 in South Sumatra. (Photograph by the author).

Research on Pasemah decorated tombs began during the Dutch colonial period, when the remains were sometimes misidentified as Hindu-period or were interpreted through hyper-diffusionist frameworks (Van der Hoop 1932; van Heekeren 1958). These views were later overturned by more systematic investigations, especially those of Van der Hoop, which established the prehistoric character of the megalithic culture and documented painted tombs. The depiction of Dong Son Heger I type bronze drums in some murals suggests a chronology from the late first millennium BCE onwards, although local sequences remain debated (Van der Hoop 1932; Bellwood 2017; Triwurjani 2013). Surveys conducted from the 1980s onwards have documented multiple decorated tombs, including the Lembak group, revealing sophisticated pictorial techniques such as colour zoning and spatially structured composition (Triwurjani 2013). These monuments often lack large, mounded superstructures; instead, upright stone

slabs form chamber walls that were accessed through vertical shafts and sealed after burial (Van der Hoop 1932; Triwurjani 2013). The murals depict hybrid human-animal figures, geometric motifs, bronze-drum imagery, and mythical beings such as the Makara (Figure 20), indicating participation in wider symbolic networks while preserving a distinctly local visual logic (Van der Hoop 1932; Triwurjani 2013). The emergence of decorated tombs in southern Sumatra appears to have been stimulated by external ideas associated with population movement and long-distance exchange, but not by the direct transplantation of an entire decorated-tomb system. As in north-western Iberia, mortuary painting became a means through which local communities materialised memory, cosmology, and identity under regional conditions (Bradley 1998; Bellwood 2017).

Concluding Remarks

The significance of these cases lies not in direct historical connection with Japan, but in their structural comparability. In both north-western Iberia and southern Sumatra, decorated tombs developed in regions without a clearly identifiable civilisational centre equivalent to Egypt, imperial China, or the Classic Maya (Bradley 1998; Scarre 2011). Yet in both cases, burial imagery became a medium through which local communities articulated memory, cosmology, and identity by selectively reworking wider symbolic influences (Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002; Triwurjani 2013; Bellwood 2017). This pattern offers an important comparative analogue for Japanese decorated tumuli, especially those of Kyushu, which likewise appear to materialise communal mortuary logics rather than simply reproduce imported funerary models.

Conclusion: Japanese Decorated Tumuli as Community-Oriented Mortuary Spaces

This chapter has sought to reposition Japanese decorated tumuli within a broader comparative archaeology of funerary representation (Trigger 2003). Rather than treating them as isolated anomalies or merely local variants within Kofun culture, it has examined them through a limited set of comparative variables: modes of human representation, the balance between narrative and decorative emphasis, the presence or absence of hierarchical scaling, and the relationship between decorated burial traditions and political centres.

From this perspective, Japanese decorated tumuli—especially those concentrated in Kyushu—display a distinctive configuration. Frontal and profile views coexist across the corpus, explicit hierarchical scaling is generally weak or absent, and pictorial programmes often combine symbolic, decorative, and narrative elements without consistently centring the tomb occupant as an individualised subject of commemoration (Kidder 2007; Barnes 2007). These tendencies do not by themselves prove a single social meaning, but they are consistent with the interpretation that decorated tumuli functioned less as monuments to individual status than as mortuary spaces in which communal memory, ritual relationships, and shared symbolic worlds were materially rearticulated (Halbwachs 1992; J. Assmann 2011). This interpretation also helps explain why the Japanese case can be meaningfully compared with decorated tomb traditions that appear to have emerged through local reconfiguration rather than direct transplantation, such as those of north-western Iberia and southern Sumatra (Bueno Ramírez and de Balbín Behrmann 2002; Triwurjani 2013). In this sense, Japanese decorated tumuli should be understood not as exceptional curiosities, but as one historically specific expression of a more general human tendency to visualise death, preserve memory, and renegotiate community through burial space. Future work incorporating broader regional corpora and finer chronological resolution will further clarify both the diversity and the recurrent logic of decorated tomb traditions across human history.

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CHAPTER 10

PICTURING THE INVISIBLE: AFTERLIFE IMAGINARIES IN KOGURYŎ TOMB MURALS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED SPACE IN EAST ASIA

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This chapter examines Koguryŏ tomb murals (fourth–early seventh centuries) as a privileged archive for reconstructing afterlife imaginaries in an early Korean polity whose written record is scarce and historiographically mediated. While acknowledging the transregional circulation of motifs and the elite, highly selective nature of the mural corpus, the study treats the tomb interior as a constructed sacred space in which images did not merely reflect belief but helped to produce it. Through a diachronic analysis of iconographic programmes and their architectural settings, the chapter traces a long-term shift from an immanent funerary model—centred on the continued presence of the deceased through scenes of daily life, status display, and vitalistic activity—to a progressively abstract and transcendental configuration in which the human figure recedes and the afterlife is organised through symbolic and cosmological systems. Early murals displace death through representations of movement, abundance, and controlled violence, thereby stabilising individuality and social hierarchy beyond the grave. From the mid-fifth century onward, however, narrative continuity yields to decorative, devotional, and apotropaic registers shaped by the growing impact of Buddhism and, in the late phase, Daoist-inflected astral cosmology. The increasing dominance of tutelary imagery—most notably the Four Directional Deities—reconfigures the tomb as a microcosm of cosmic order in which protection and balance replace biography as the primary visual concern. The chapter argues that this transformation should be understood not as artistic decline but as a redefinition of what could be represented, as funerary art developed visual strategies for 'picturing the invisible' and securing passage into an otherworld conceived as increasingly beyond figuration.

Keywords: *Koguryŏ Tomb Murals, Afterlife, Sacred Space, Four Directional Deities, East Asian Cosmology*

「見えないもの」を画く：高句麗古墳壁画における来世のイマジナリーと東アジアにおける聖なる

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本章は、文献資料が乏しく、かつ後代の歴史叙述によって媒介されてきた初期朝鮮国家における来世観を再構築するうえで、高句麗古墳壁画（4 世紀〜7 世紀初頭）を重要な史料として位置づけ、その意義を検討するものである。モチーフの広域的な流通や、壁画資料がエリート層に限定された高度に選択的な性格を有する点を踏まえつつ、本研究は古墳内部を、単に信仰を反映する場としてではなく、むしろ信仰を生成する構築的な聖域として捉える。図像構成とその建築的配置を通時的に分析することにより、

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本章は、日常生活の情景や身分秩序の顕示、生命力に満ちた活動を通して死者の存在の持続を表象する内在的な葬送モデルから、人間像が次第に後退し、象徴的かつ宇宙論的な体系によって来世が構造化される、より抽象的・超越的な構成へと移行していく長期的変化を明らかにする。初期壁画においては、運動や豊穣、統御された暴力といった表象を介して死は間接的に処理され、その結果として、墓後における個人性および社会的秩序の安定が図られている。しかし 5 世紀中葉以降になると、このような物語的連続性は次第に後退し、仏教の影響の拡大、さらには後期における道教的要素を帯びた星辰宇宙論の浸透に伴い、装飾的・信仰的・呪術的な表現が顕著となる。とりわけ四神に代表される守護的図像の優位化は、古墳空間を宇宙秩序の縮図として再編成し、視覚的関心の中心を個人の伝記的再現から、保護と均衡へと転換させる。本章は、この変化を単なる芸術的衰退としてではなく、何が表象可能であるのかという枠組みそのものの再定義として理解すべきであると論じる。すなわち、葬送美術は「不可視なるものをいかに描くか」という課題に応答する視覚的戦略を発展させ、次第に表象を超えた他界への移行を担保する装置として機能するに至ったと主張したい。

キーワード： 高句麗古墳壁画、来世観、聖なる空間、四神、東アジアの宇宙観

Introduction

The mural paintings preserved in the tombs of Koguryŏ constitute a cultural legacy of exceptional significance, not only from an artistic standpoint but also from historical and religious perspectives. Their importance is further amplified by the relative scarcity—and the substantial historiographical limitations—of written and epigraphic sources produced within the kingdom itself. The principal textual source for the reconstruction of Koguryŏ history remains the *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms), compiled in 1145, several centuries after the events it purports to describe.[2] Beyond this chronological distance, the *Samguk sagi* cannot be regarded as a neutral historical account, particularly with respect to Koguryŏ. Rather, it represents a carefully constructed historiographical project centred on Silla, shaped by the political and ideological imperatives of the twelfth century and deeply influenced by classical Chinese models of dynastic historiography (Yi 2014). As such, the text is both temporally removed from the historical reality of Koguryŏ and ideologically mediated, reflecting the Confucian normative framework and state-centred concerns of its compilers. In light of the paucity of contemporaneous written sources for the early history of the Korean Peninsula, the survival of a rich and extensive corpus of Koguryŏ mural tomb paintings is particularly remarkable. Unlike textual sources—shaped by retrospective selection, editorial mediation, and ideological framing—these murals constitute a largely contemporaneous visual record, offering a comparatively direct and less filtered insight into the material culture, social practices, cosmological conceptions, and symbolic universe of Koguryŏ society.

At the same time, several important limitations must be acknowledged. Koguryŏ mural paintings cannot be interpreted as wholly autonomous or unmediated expressions of local belief systems. Many

[2] It is important to note, moreover, that the earliest surviving complete woodblock edition of the *Samguk sagi*—the version upon which modern scholarship generally relies—is even later. This edition, commonly known as the Chŏngdŏk or Imsin edition, dates to the fifteenth century, further widening the temporal gap between the historical events and their textual transmission.

of the motifs, iconographic themes, and compositional schemes employed in these tombs were already well established within broader East Asian visual traditions, particularly those of Han and post-Han China, as well as within wider Northeast Asian cultural networks (Azuma & Tanaka 1995). Some of the earliest mural tombs also display features closely comparable to those identified in Liaoning Province. Tombs such as Tonggu Sasin-ch'ong and Chinp'ari No. 4 exemplify the selective absorption and creative reinterpretation of stylistic principles associated with the Northern and Southern Dynasties, especially the dynamic organization of forms intended to convey powerful flows of *qi* (see Park 2009). While these models were selectively adapted and reconfigured in accordance with local aesthetic preferences, political ambitions, social hierarchies, and cosmological concerns, the extent to which they reflect uniquely Koguryŏ conceptions must therefore be assessed with caution.

A second limitation concerns the highly elitist nature of the mural tomb corpus itself: tombs decorated with paintings constitute only a very small fraction of the overall funerary record. In the Ji'an area alone, out of nearly 11,000 excavated tombs, only thirty-five contain pictorial representations. This numerical imbalance necessarily constrains the scope of any reconstruction based on mural evidence, indicating that the worldview expressed in these tombs reflects only a restricted segment of Koguryŏ society—most likely elite groups with access to specialised artisans and the substantial economic resources required for mural production. Consequently, while mural tombs provide invaluable insights into specific religious, social, and ideological configurations, they cannot be taken as representative of Koguryŏ thought as a whole, but rather as windows onto a narrowly circumscribed cultural stratum or specific elite clans. Nevertheless, only in three cases is it possible to identify the names of the tomb occupants: Anak Tomb No. 3, Tŏkhŭng-ni, and Mutoulou.[3] Building on this premise, the present chapter has examined how the themes represented in Koguryŏ tomb murals articulate the religious boundaries of the kingdom and how such boundaries were negotiated, redefined, and transformed over time. Through funerary imagery, the murals thus illuminate the evolving spiritual landscape of Koguryŏ society.

Preliminary Remarks on Sources, Chronology, and Method

The territories that today encompass the principal archaeological and artistic sites of Koguryŏ were subjected to sustained devastation beginning at least in 598, when the kingdom entered direct military confrontation with the Sui dynasty, and continuing until the fall of P'yŏngyang in 668 to the allied Silla–Tang forces. The period following the so-called 'Silla unification' was itself marked by further decades of warfare, as armed conflict persisted across former Koguryŏ territories between Koguryŏ restoration forces and the Tang army, as well as in subsequent hostilities between Tang and Silla. Under Parhae, moreover, the political epicentre shifted toward the northeastern regions of Dongbei, resulting in the neglect of territories that had previously functioned as major Koguryŏ capitals. This prolonged condition of warfare and abandonment reduced most Koguryŏ urban centres to ruins and led to the large-scale dispersal of their populations. Under such circumstances, nearly all surface architecture was destroyed, along with much of the kingdom's artistic and textual heritage, leaving behind only a limited number of material traces—above all, funerary monuments and tombs.

[3] Even in these instances, the precise identities of the individuals concerned remain uncertain. The inscription in Anak Tomb No. 3 states that the monument was constructed in honour of Tongsu (Dongshou), a high-ranking official who may not have been of Koguryŏ origin. Some scholars, however, have proposed identifying the tomb's occupant as King Mich'ŏn or King Kogug'wŏn, arguing that it would otherwise be difficult to account for the expression *sŏngsang pŏn* (聖上幡) found in the inscription, a designation generally reserved for sovereigns.

Koguryŏ elites invested extraordinary resources in funerary architecture, monumentalising death as a collective statement of values, status, and cosmological order meant to outlast the destruction of the living world (Kim and An 2003). Particularly significant is the way in which this monumentality evolved over time. In the earliest phase, it was expressed primarily through exterior form: stone-piled tombs (*chŏksŏk-ch'ong*) rose as imposing, pyramidal structures within necropolises situated outside the urban sphere (Figure 1). From the fourth century onward, however, this sense of grandeur was progressively internalised, becoming increasingly concentrated within the walls and ceilings of the burial chamber through mural painting. The tomb thus emerged as a sealed sacred space, deliberately detached from the external world, in which visual splendour and symbolic meaning were confined entirely to the interior. Interest in mural painting may have been further encouraged by the conquest of the Nangnang region in 313, where the presence—and possibly the local production—of paintings of exceptionally high artistic quality is already attested, as well as by Koguryŏ expansion into Liaoning, an area in which sophisticated wall-painting traditions were firmly established.



Figure 1: Example of a stone-piled tomb (*chŏksŏk-ch'ong*), the Tomb of the General at Ji'an. (Wikimedia Commons, photo by Bart0278).

Although some Koguryŏ tombs were known as early as the Qing period, systematic archaeological investigation of mural tombs effectively began during the Japanese colonial era (Han 2002). The practice of producing detailed drawn copies of Koguryŏ tomb murals dates back to 1912, when Sekino Tadashi conducted excavations at the Kangsŏ Great Tomb and the Kangsŏ Middle Tomb. The reproductions produced under his supervision remain invaluable resources for both modern restoration efforts and

scholarly analysis. This initiative marked the beginning of the systematic documentation and visual recording of Koguryŏ mural paintings, laying the foundations for subsequent research into their iconography, stylistic development, and historical significance (Chŏn 2018). By 2017, a total of 123 Koguryŏ tombs with mural paintings had been identified.[4] Produced continuously from the fourth to the early seventh century,[5] these murals constitute one of the most enduring and distinctive visual traditions of early Northeast Asia. It is particularly noteworthy that the other Korean kingdoms have left little to no comparable pictorial evidence. Of the 123 known mural tombs, thirty-eight are located in the regions surrounding Cholbon, the first capital of Koguryŏ (present-day Huanren), and Kungnaesŏng, the second capital (present-day Ji'an), both in present-day China. Although relatively limited, the presence of tombs in the Huanren area, which served as the seat of the kingdom's first capital, is nonetheless attested (Hwang 1992). The remaining eighty-five tombs are concentrated in what is now North Korea, primarily in the P'yŏngyang region along the middle and lower reaches of the Taedong River, as well as in the Chaeryŏng River basin and the Anak area (Korean Cultural Heritage 2018). Although a small number of Koguryŏ-style tombs have also been identified in South Korea—particularly in the Seoul area, most notably in the Sŏkch'on-dong district—the archaeological record there is highly fragmentary, severely limiting our ability to reconstruct their original scale and decorative programmes, including the possible presence of mural paintings.[6]

Within the inscriptions preserved in Anak Tomb No. 3, dated to 357 CE, and in the Tŏkhŭng-ni Tomb, dated to 408 CE, explicit chronological references to the time of construction have been identified. These epigraphic data have played a crucial role in establishing a secure absolute chronology for the two monuments, which in turn has provided fixed points of reference for dating other Koguryŏ funerary structures. By using Anak Tomb No. 3 and the Tŏkhŭng-ni Tomb as chronological anchors, scholars have been able to situate more precisely the development of iconographic programmes and thematic motifs in Koguryŏ mural painting, clarifying their relative sequence and historical evolution within the broader framework of fourth- and early fifth-century Koguryŏ culture. The corpus as a whole spans a broad historical arc of the Koguryŏ kingdom, encompassing both the period of its greatest political and cultural florescence in the early fifth century and the subsequent, gradual process of decline that culminated in the kingdom's collapse in the late seventh century. Fifth-century Koguryŏ,

[4] From the early 2000s onward, a group of eleven Koguryŏ mural tombs has been systematically investigated and excavated through archaeological research, and this corpus is frequently cited in both academic scholarship and survey literature. These include the T'aesŏng-ni 3-ho tomb excavated in 2001, the Songchung-ni mural tomb excavated in 2002, and three tombs investigated in 2009—the Minsok Kongwŏn 1-ho tomb, the Tongsan-dong mural tomb, and the Taesŏng-dong 34-ho tomb—followed by the Ongno-ri mural tomb in 2010, the Kosandong 1-ho tomb in 2011, the Honam-ni mural tomb in 2013, the Ch'ŏndŏng-ni mural tomb in 2016, and finally the Posŏng-ni mural tomb and the Changsuwŏn-dong mural tomb, both excavated in 2017.

[5] It should be noted, however, that scholarly opinions diverge regarding the chronology of Koguryŏ mural tombs. While the conventional view places the beginning of their production in the fourth century, some scholars have proposed an earlier dating, advancing the onset of mural decoration to the second half of the third century.

[6] Historical surveys conducted during urban expansion in the twentieth century indicate that the broader Sŏkch'on-dong necropolis once contained a much larger concentration of stone mound tombs, with early reports suggesting over three hundred tombs across an area extending toward the present-day Karak district, but only a handful survived into the modern era. Systematic excavation has identified six to seven tomb mounds at the designated Ancient Tombs site (Historic Site No. 243), while the majority were obliterated by urban development, infrastructure construction, and land reclamation associated with Seoul's rapid twentieth-century growth, leaving little trace of the original burial landscape. Because of this extensive destruction, it is impossible to determine whether the original Sŏkch'on-dong tombs once featured mural decoration comparable to that found in Koguryŏ proper.

in particular, emerges as a highly dynamic polity.[7] During this period, it flourished as one of the major powers shaping the East Asian international order and exercised hegemonic influence across Northeast Asia. Throughout the seventy-nine-year reign of King Changsu (r. 413–491), the kingdom experienced a prolonged phase of political stability and cultural prosperity. After 427, P'yŏngyang stood at the centre of the Koguryŏ world and functioned as the nucleus of a cultural sphere whose influence extended across Northeast Asia, including the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. The mural tombs produced during this period should therefore be understood not merely as funerary monuments, but as visual expressions embedded within a broader context of political confidence, cultural openness, and ideological self-definition. From a thematic perspective, Koguryŏ mural paintings are conventionally divided into three broad phases, each reflecting distinct iconographic priorities and corresponding conceptions of the afterlife. The earliest phase, spanning roughly the fourth and early fifth centuries, is characterised by the prominence of human figures and narrative scenes drawn from the lived experience of the deceased. Banquets, processions, domestic activities, hunting scenes, and courtly practices dominate the visual programme, articulating an eschatological vision in which death was conceived largely as a continuation of earthly existence and the tomb as an imperishable dwelling for the dead. Particularly significant in this phase is the frequent inclusion of architectural elements—such as columns, beams, and bracket systems—which appear to reconstruct the spatial markers of domestic or ceremonial environments within the funerary chamber itself. Although this phase already incorporates motifs derived from both Daoist and Buddhist traditions, such elements remain subordinate to the visual affirmation of individual identity, social rank, and worldly status, which continue to structure the representation of the afterlife primarily through the lens of lived experience.

In the second phase, corresponding broadly to the mid-fifth and early sixth centuries, the figure of the deceased gradually recedes, and mural programmes display an increasing emphasis on decorative and symbolic motifs. Floral patterns, clouds, lotus flowers, and abstract signs begin to prevail over narrative scenes, signalling a shift toward a more metaphysical understanding of the afterlife. This transition reflects a growing engagement with Buddhist cosmology, as well as a progressive abstraction of funerary imagery, in which the tomb is no longer conceived primarily as a replica of the earthly world but as a space of spiritual transformation. The final phase, dating to the sixth and seventh centuries, is marked by the overwhelming dominance of the Four Directional Deities: the Azure Dragon of the East, the White Tiger of the West, the Vermilion Bird of the South, and the Black Tortoise entwined with a serpent of the North. In this period, human figures nearly disappear altogether, and the funerary space is reconfigured as a cosmological microcosm governed by protective astral forces. On an eschatological level, this development corresponds to a fully transcendental vision of the afterlife, strongly informed by Daoist cosmology. The prevalence of Daoist imagery in the final phase may be interpreted, at least in part, as a response to shifts in political power during the late Koguryŏ period, when Daoist-oriented factions gained increasing influence within the ruling elite. The progressive disappearance of the deceased's image thus reflects not only a religious transformation but also a broader reorientation of funerary ideology under changing political and ideological conditions.

[7] The unification of northern China by the Northern Wei dynasty in 439 contributed to the emergence of a new balance of power in East Asia, structured around four major spheres: the Rouran Khaganate, which dominated Inner Asia; Northern Wei in northern China; the Liu Song dynasty in southern China; and Koguryŏ in eastern and northeastern Asia. These four powers, which effectively reorganised East Asia into interacting geopolitical zones, maintained a delicate equilibrium through rivalry while simultaneously engaging in sustained diplomatic, social, and cultural exchange. As the hegemonic power of Northeast Asia, Koguryŏ actively absorbed new and diverse cultural elements through its interactions with these states, thereby consolidating its position as a major cultural centre of the region.

For the purposes of the present chapter, however, this tripartite thematic development will be analytically reduced to two broader eschatological configurations. The first may be defined as an immanentist model, corresponding to the earliest phase of mural production, in which death is conceived primarily as a continuation of life and the tomb functions as an enduring residence for the deceased. In this framework, the persistence of the individual—through bodily presence, social identity, and quotidian activity—remains central, and funerary imagery emphasises narrative scenes drawn from lived experience, despite the presence of early Daoist and Buddhist elements.

The second configuration may be described as a more abstract and transcendental model, encompassing the later phases of mural production, in which the representation of the deceased progressively disappears and funerary imagery is reorganised around symbolic, cosmological, and protective motifs. This analytical distinction does not deny the complexity or gradual nature of the transition between phases, but rather provides a heuristic framework through which to examine the shifting eschatological assumptions underlying Koguryŏ mural painting.

Immanence and Individual Identity in Early Koguryŏ Funerary Imagery

Despite their rich religious and symbolic layers, Koguryŏ mural paintings largely avoid any explicit iconography of death itself. Death is not conceived as an imageable event, but rather as an abstract condition, and the tomb functions as its primary representation—a material symbol of omnipresence and inevitability. The only explicit representations of death that appear in Koguryŏ murals are those involving animals or, more rarely, defeated enemies. A particularly revealing example is found in the Changch'ŏn No. 1 Tomb, where a large wild boar is depicted at a moment of extreme emotional tension. With eyes wide open, the animal appears terror-stricken as it realises that a hunter blocks its escape route.



Figure 2: Detail of a mural painting from Tonggou Tomb No. 12. (Wikimedia Commons).

Through this vivid visualisation of animal fear in the face of imminent death, the mural performs a deeper symbolic function: it externalises and exorcises the horror associated with the inevitability of one's own death, translating existential anxiety into a controlled and narratively framed visual scene. In this sense, death is never represented directly—neither in abstract nor allegorical form—but is mediated through scenes of hunting or combat, in which violence and annihilation are ritualised and symbolically contained (Chŏn 2000, 2004). A comparable mechanism can be observed in the Tonggou No. 12 Tomb, where death is evoked through the depiction of an enemy warrior being executed after combat (Figure 2). Here again, the act of killing does not function as a representation of death per se, but rather as part of a narrative logic centred on victory, domination, and the restoration of order. Violence thus becomes a symbolic language through which death is controlled and neutralised, subordinated to the affirmation of life, vitality, and the continuity of cosmic and social order.

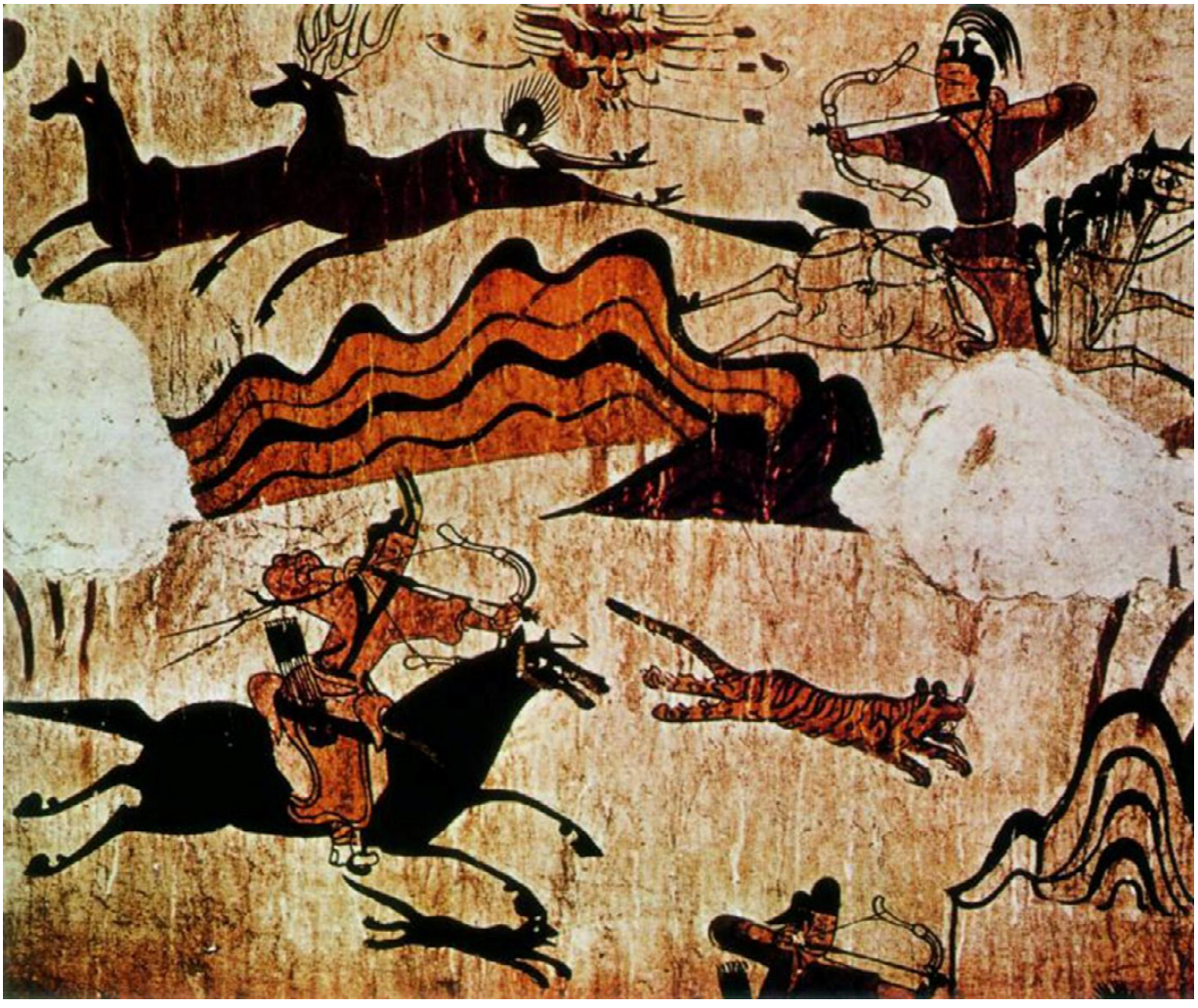

Figure 3: Detail of a mural painting from the tomb of the Dancers, Ji'an. (Wikimedia Commons).

More generally, Koguryŏ tomb murals do not depict death itself, but rather life—and, in the earliest examples in particular, the lived experience of the deceased. Mural programmes selectively reconstruct

scenes drawn from everyday existence that were deemed most meaningful and worthy of visual perpetuation. One of the most distinctive features of the earliest phase of Koguryŏ mural production is the prominence of scenes portraying daily life, including banquets, hunting expeditions, processions, domestic activities, and courtly practices (Figure 3). A particularly early and revealing example is Anak Tomb No. 3 (357 CE), whose corridor walls present an extensive procession of approximately 250 figures accompanied by a large musical ensemble of sixty-four performers (Figure 4). This pronounced vitalism is even more evident in hunting scenes, which occupy a central place within the visual repertoire of early Koguryŏ tombs. Hunting was not only a crucial component of the kingdom's economic foundation but also a highly charged political and symbolic activity. It functioned as a privileged arena in which nobles and kings could publicly display physical prowess, martial skill, and moral authority, reinforcing their legitimacy as rulers and elite warriors. Moreover, hunting appears recurrently in Koguryŏ mythological narratives, further underscoring its role as a culturally resonant practice through which ideals of power, valour, and cosmic order were articulated.



Figure 4: Anak Tomb No. 3. (Wikimedia Commons, photo by Love29son).

Through such imagery, the tomb occupant is presented as an active participant in the social world he inhabited during life, thereby preserving a recognisable and individualised identity beyond death. This emphasis on scenes of daily life may be understood as an early form of funerary portraiture, anticipating a theme that would acquire profound importance in the later history of Korean art. The fear of the dissolution of individuality appears to have been among the most pervasive anxieties associated with death in ancient societies, and the visual affirmation of personal identity within the funerary space functioned as a response to this concern. Closely intertwined with the preservation of individuality is the maintenance of social status. In Koguryŏ mural paintings, the scale of the deceased figure is generally proportional to rank, while headgear, insignia, posture, and attire reaffirm aristocratic origin and official standing. The murals thus do not merely commemorate the deceased; they actively construct a visual identity in which personal presence and social hierarchy are projected into the afterlife. In the earliest phase, this representation is strongly hieratic, emphasising frontal

posture, scale, and formal rigidity. Over time, however, the image of the deceased becomes progressively embedded within more varied narrative contexts, interacting with attendants or guests and participating in a range of activities. This evolution marks a gradual shift from static iconicity toward relational and situational representation, reflecting broader transformations in conceptions of identity, agency, and continuity beyond death.

Rather than aiming at naturalistic depiction, these images reveal a deliberate tendency toward hieratisation and idealisation. The deceased is consistently portrayed in the full vigour of adulthood, and realism is conspicuously absent. The faces of vassals and attendants are rendered in an almost identical manner, devoid of individualised features or expressive variation, suggesting that these figures function less as portraits than as typified embodiments of social roles. A similar strategy is evident in the Tŏkhŭng-ni Tomb, where the inscription records that the deceased was seventy-seven years old at the time of death, yet the mural figure displays no signs of aging (De Benedittis 2013). The image thus projects an idealised and timeless identity, privileging symbolic permanence over biological reality and excluding age, decay, and corporeal decline from the visual economy of the afterlife. In these mural compositions, a pronounced sense of spatial depth is largely absent. Mountains and architectural structures are juxtaposed side by side, and pictorial planes rarely overlap, following conventions comparable to those observed in early Chinese mural traditions, such as those at Dunhuang. Equally noteworthy is the emphasis on movement: figures are rendered with agility and dynamism, reflecting what a contemporary source, the Book of Wei, described as the hurried gait of the people of Koguryŏ. Of great importance, moreover, is the depiction of astronomical elements—sun, moon, and constellations—which associate the afterlife with a vertical eschatology oriented toward the sky (for more see Kim 2005).

Even the mural paintings of the earliest phase are not entirely insulated from external religious influences, but already incorporate iconographic elements drawn from both Daoist and Buddhist repertoires. By around the fifth century, Buddhist beliefs among the Koguryŏ elite had become sufficiently influential to reshape prevailing conceptions of the afterlife. This transformation, however, did not occur abruptly, nor did it entail the wholesale replacement of earlier cosmological systems. Rather, it unfolded through a gradual reconfiguration of preexisting frameworks, within which Buddhist, Daoist, and indigenous traditions coexisted, overlapped, and interacted in complex and multilayered ways. Buddhism, officially transmitted to Koguryŏ in 372, found one of its most explicit funerary expressions in the paired male–female depiction of lotus rebirth in the Changch'ŏn No. 1 Tomb. In this monument, the murals portray the tomb's occupant couple being reborn together in the Pure Land, expressing both their aspiration for joint rebirth and the fulfilment of that wish. The ceiling of the antechamber depicts the couple prostrating themselves before the Tathāgata, surrounded by flying apsaras, while bodhisattvas flank the central Buddha on the side walls. Through this carefully structured spatial arrangement, the tomb interior evokes the experiential impression of entering a Buddhist temple, transforming the funerary chamber into a fully sacralised ritual space. Particularly noteworthy is the exceptional depiction of husband and wife emerging simultaneously from a single lotus blossom—unlike the single-figure rebirth scenes found in other Koguryŏ tombs—which suggests a sophisticated and informed understanding of Buddhist soteriology on the part of the deceased (Kim 2008). From the fifth century onward, the diffusion of Buddhism across East Asia left an increasingly visible imprint on Koguryŏ funerary art. Lotus motifs, closely associated with its symbolism, appear with growing frequency, providing compelling evidence that Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife had gained substantial currency within elite society. In tombs such as Ssangyŏng-ch'ong and Anak Tomb No. 2, lotus patterns are often accompanied by processions of monks or aristocrats presenting offerings, visually articulating acts of devotion and merit-making. Similarly, the concentric-circle motifs found in

Hwanmun-ch'ong may be interpreted as representations of the Buddha's head halo, symbolising enlightenment and compassionate radiance.

In parallel, it is also possible to identify iconographic elements derived from Daoist traditions. In the earliest mural tombs, the iconographic repertoire remains firmly anchored in beliefs related to ascension to immortality, which were widespread throughout East Asia. The ceilings of burial chambers are frequently adorned with constellations, imaginary animals, immortals, and jade maidens, articulating a vision of the afterlife grounded in celestial transcendence rather than in Buddhist soteriology. A representative example is provided by the antechamber ceiling of the Tŏkhŭng-ni Tomb (408 CE), densely populated with astral symbols, fantastic creatures, and figures associated with immortality (Ahn 2012). Comparable iconographic elements appear in the burial chamber ceiling of the Tomb of the Dancers (mid–fifth century), where immortals and jade maidens are accompanied by auspicious birds and beasts. In both cases, the immortals depicted are not deities in the strict sense, but exceptional beings who, having once been human, have attained eternal life and thus occupy a liminal position between the human and divine realms. Taken together, these visual strategies reveal an eschatological imagination in which death is neither denied nor directly confronted, but instead reconfigured through images of vitality, cosmic order, and transcendence—an approach that would gradually give way, in later phases, to more abstract and metaphysical conceptions of the afterlife.

Transcendence and Abstraction in Late Koguryŏ Funerary Iconography

By the mid-fifth century, Koguryŏ funerary imagery undergoes a significant transformation, as the figure of the deceased gradually recedes together with the earlier emphasis on opulence and worldly abundance that had characterised previous tomb environments. This development is accompanied by the near-total disappearance of human figures and may be interpreted as the outcome of a progressive spiritualisation of religious belief. The afterlife is no longer conceived primarily as a continuation of earthly existence, but increasingly as a metaphysical and transcendent realm, detached from individual biography, social display, and human presence (Kang 1994). This ideological transformation is paralleled by profound changes in both funerary architecture and mural programmes between the mid-fifth and early sixth centuries, marking a second major phase in the development of Koguryŏ funerary art. Tomb architecture becomes progressively simplified, typically consisting of a corridor leading to a single burial chamber. Architectural articulation grows more restrained, while pictorial repertoires become increasingly selective. From a technical standpoint, this evolution culminates in the abandonment of preparatory plaster layers: in the mature and late phases, murals are painted directly onto the stone walls of the burial chamber. This shift reflects not merely a technical adaptation, but a deeper reorientation of funerary ideology and visual expression. Within this new visual framework, scenes associated with daily life and worldly experience gradually give way to predominantly decorative and symbolic motifs—such as lotus flowers, clouds, the character *wang* (王), and concentric circles—which, together with images of tutelary deities, come to dominate mural programs. While the adoption of these elements may in part reflect changing aesthetic conventions, it more plausibly corresponds to a transformation in religious worldview closely linked to the growing influence of Buddhism within the kingdom.

In the third and final phase of mural production, spanning the sixth and seventh centuries, representations of tutelary deities become the overwhelmingly dominant motif, almost entirely displacing other figurative themes in tombs located both in former capitals and in newly developed centres. This iconographic reconfiguration coincides with a period of profound political instability.

During the sixth century, Koguryŏ experienced a marked erosion of central authority and violent internal struggles among the ruling aristocracy: Kings Anjang and Anwŏn were both killed during rebellions, and the conflicts surrounding King Anwŏn's succession alone reportedly resulted in more than two thousand deaths, many among the contemporary elite. This period effectively marks the end of the kingdom's phase of growth and expansion, ushering in a trajectory of decline and political crisis. This climate of internal turmoil likely contributed to a loss of confidence in the earthly world and encouraged the projection of hopes for stability and salvation onto a transcendent realm removed from the darkness and uncertainty of the present. The disappearance of the festive and vitalistic imagery characteristic of the earliest phase thus reflects an underlying atmosphere of unease and existential insecurity. This transformation in religious outlook also coincides with the consolidation of Daoism as an officially promoted tradition following the coup d'état of Yŏn Kaesomun. In this final phase, Daoism emerges as a particularly influential ideological framework. Officially introduced under the Tang dynasty in 624 and further promoted during the reign of King Pojang, Daoism may have been supported in part as a political counterweight to the growing influence of Buddhist institutions. Whatever its political motivations, Daoism provided a highly effective cosmological and iconographic vocabulary for articulating an increasingly abstract vision of the afterlife.

Within the funerary space of this period, a superhuman and increasingly oneiric worldview comes to prevail, marked by renewed engagement with forms of Han-period cosmology and mysticism. The tomb ceases to function as the imperishable dwelling of the deceased and instead becomes a stone microcosm that mediates the passage of the dead into a realm of immortality. During this phase, the iconography of the Four Directional Deities assumes growing prominence within funerary and cosmological representations. Their increasing centrality marks a decisive shift toward a cosmologically ordered conception of the afterlife, in which balance and protection are ensured by superhuman forces rather than by the continued presence or agency of the deceased (Na 2008). The iconography of the Four Directional Deities has its roots in the Han period, and one of the earliest known examples of mural representation featuring this symbolic constellation was discovered in present-day Henan Province, at the site of Han Tomb No. 46 at Xishuipo, where a dragon and a tiger are depicted together. From the Neolithic period onward, the dragon and the tiger played a fundamental symbolic role as companions and protectors of the deceased, entrusted with safeguarding the body, defending the tomb from desecration, and repelling malevolent spirits that might threaten the coffin. For this reason, these figures were frequently painted near the entrance of the burial chamber, where their apotropaic function could be most effectively deployed. It remains difficult to determine precisely when this initial iconographic nucleus was expanded to include the Vermilion Bird and the Black Tortoise. Nevertheless, a bronze incense burner bearing the motifs of the Four Deities, discovered in Han Tomb No. 6 in Xi'an, suggests that a fully articulated composition may have already existed at a very early stage. Notably, in this object the Black Tortoise appears without the entwined serpent motif (龜蛇交尾型), which would become a defining characteristic only in later periods. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Four Directional Deities became one of the most recurrent themes in mural painting, almost invariably present in burial chambers and frequently accompanied by additional elements drawn from the Daoist symbolic repertoire. For much of this period, the Deities were depicted without explicit association with specific directions, a convention that persisted until the late Southern Dynasties. Only at a later stage were the Four Directional Deities systematically associated with specific cardinal directions and corresponding constellations, thereby assuming their fully developed role as guardians of distinct regions of the heavens.

As the evidence from Koguryŏ tomb murals shows, the iconography of the Four Directional Deities underwent a gradual but clearly discernible process of expansion, spatial redefinition, and symbolic

consolidation within the funerary space. In the earliest phase, representations of the Deities appear only partially and are often incomplete or unevenly distributed. In some tombs, only three Deities are depicted, with the Vermilion Bird still absent, as in the Liaodong Fortress Tomb, while in others only the Dragon and the Tiger are represented within the burial chamber, as in the Tomb of the Dancers, with the Tortoise still omitted. In a subsequent stage, all Four Animals appear together, initially concentrated on the ceiling of the burial chamber, as in Changchuan Tomb No. 1 (Tomb of the Three Chambers). In certain cases, such as the Yaksu-ri Tomb, the deceased is explicitly associated with Xuanwu on the northern wall, indicating an early attempt to link the iconography of protection with the individual buried within the tomb.

From this point onward, the Four Directional Deities gradually expand from the ceiling to the walls of the burial chamber. In tombs such as P'alch'ŏng-ri and the Tomb of the Stars, the Deities are distributed along the lateral walls, while the rear wall often continues to host the image of the deceased, sometimes in direct association with Xuanwu, as seen in Taean-ri Tomb No. 1, the Twin Pillars Tomb, the Four Deities Tomb at Maesan-ri, and the Spotted Horse Tomb. This spatial arrangement reflects a transitional phase in which the protective cosmological framework coexists with earlier narrative and biographical elements.



Figure 5: Detail of the Azure Dragon from the Great Tomb of Kangsŏ. (Wikimedia Commons, photo by Veronicasorce).

In later stages, however, a decisive shift becomes evident. The image of the deceased progressively disappears from the funerary space, while the Four Directional Deities remain as the dominant iconographic presence. In tombs such as Wuhui Nos. 4 and 5, Chinp'ari Tomb No. 1, and the Four Deities Tomb at Tonggou, the Deities are accompanied not by human figures but by decorative and symbolic

motifs, including honeysuckle patterns, clouds, and lotus flowers. These elements serve to fill the pictorial field and reinforce the abstract and cosmological character of the space, further distancing the tomb from narrative representation.

In the final phase of mural production, the Four Directional Deities come to occupy the funerary chamber almost exclusively, fully displacing all other figurative themes. This development is particularly evident in the Four Deities Tomb at Honam-ri, the Great Tomb of Kangsŏ, Kosan-ri Tombs Nos. 1 and 9, and Naeri Tomb No. 1. The Great Tomb of Kangsŏ represents the most extreme and mature expression of this process: here, the Four Deities dominate all four walls of the burial chamber and constitute the sole thematic focus of the mural programme (Figure 5). Through this progressive spatial monopolisation, the iconography of the Four Directional Deities evolves from a supplementary protective motif into the organizing principle of the funerary space itself, articulating a fully cosmological vision of the afterlife in which protection, balance, and transcendence are ensured by superhuman forces rather than by the continued visual presence of the deceased.

Taken together, these developments reveal that the iconography of the Four Directional Deities functioned not merely as a protective device, but as the organising principle of a fully transcendental eschatological vision, through which the afterlife was reimagined as an abstract, cosmologically ordered realm, no longer accessible through human narrative but structured by symbolic and astral forces alone.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that Koguryŏ tomb murals constitute not merely a corpus of exceptional artistic value, but a historically decisive archive for reconstructing the religious imagination of an early Korean polity whose written record is fragmentary, mediated, and often retrospectively framed. Against the historiographical constraints posed by later textual sources—most notably the *Samguk sagi*—the murals offer a contemporaneous visual field in which ideas of personhood, sacred space, and post-mortem destiny materialised with remarkable consistency. Yet, as emphasised throughout, this 'visual record' is not transparent evidence: it is an elite, highly selective production, shaped by transregional iconographic conventions and by the social and political interests of those who commissioned and inhabited these monuments. Within these constraints, the murals nonetheless reveal a coherent long-term transformation in Koguryŏ funerary thought. In the earliest phase, the tomb operates as an immanent sacred dwelling, a sealed but inhabited environment in which the deceased continues to exist through images of social participation, rank, and bodily vigour. The striking avoidance of explicit iconography of death does not indicate an absence of eschatological concern; rather, it signals a strategy of displacement, whereby death is rendered thinkable and controllable through scenes of vitality, movement, and order. In this context, the pictorial reconstruction of lived experience functions as a form of funerary 'presence', preserving individuality and status while embedding the dead within a stable social and cosmic horizon.

From the mid-fifth century onward, however, Koguryŏ tomb painting gradually shifts away from biography and social display toward abstraction, symbolism, and cosmological protection. The progressive disappearance of the deceased and of human figures more broadly coincides with architectural standardisation and with a narrowing of pictorial repertoires, suggesting that the tomb's efficacy was increasingly located not in narrative continuity with life, but in the construction of a metaphysical space governed by superhuman forces. Buddhist motifs and devotional imagery contribute to this reorientation by introducing new models of salvation and transformation, yet they

do so through coexistence and recombination rather than replacement. In the final centuries of mural production, Daoist-inflected astral frameworks—most visibly the Four Directional Deities—become dominant, reconfiguring the tomb as a cosmological microcosm in which protection, balance, and transcendence displace individuality as the primary visual concern.

The analytical reduction proposed here—from three thematic phases to two eschatological configurations—highlights the underlying logic of this transition: a movement from a funerary imagination grounded in immanence and identity to one structured by transcendence and cosmic order. Importantly, this shift should not be read as aesthetic decline or as a simple linear 'spiritualisation'. Rather, it reflects a redefinition of what could be visualised and what could no longer be represented: the afterlife increasingly appears as a realm that resists figuration and must instead be approached through symbolic systems capable of organising the invisible. In this sense, Koguryŏ tomb murals document a broader East Asian problem—the picturing of the unpicturable—while also revealing how a specific polity negotiated that problem through changing configurations of power, ritual, and religious vocabulary. Ultimately, these murals demonstrate that the tomb was not only a place of burial, but a carefully engineered sacred space in which images did not illustrate belief so much as actively produce the conditions under which the afterlife could be imagined, inhabited, and secured.

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CHAPTER 11

COLOURS OF THE AFTERLIFE: EXPLORING THE MURALS OF THE TAKAMATSUZUKA AND KITORA TOMBS

MARIANNA LÁZÁR[1]

This chapter examines the mural paintings of the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs in Asuka, Nara Prefecture, as visual evidence for the transmission, reception, and local transformation of continental cosmological imagery in late seventh- to early eighth-century Japan. Moving beyond approaches that treat the murals as adopted copies of Chinese or Korean prototypes, the chapter argues that they should be understood as localized visual syntheses produced through the circulation of cosmological knowledge, artistic models, painting techniques, and ritual technologies across China, the Korean peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago. Particular attention is given to the Four Gods, the twenty-eight lunar lodges, sun and moon motifs, courtly processions, and the twelve zodiac figures of the Kitora Tomb. These motifs demonstrate the deep impact of Chinese correlative cosmology, especially yin–yang and Five Phases theory, while also revealing significant Japanese reinterpretations in spatial arrangement, colour symbolism, and iconographic detail. The comparison between Takamatsuzuka and Kitora shows that the two tombs shared a common East Asian cosmological repertoire but differed markedly in composition, style, and symbolic emphasis. Takamatsuzuka presents a more delicate pictorial programme that integrates directional guardians, courtly figures, and celestial imagery into a refined funerary microcosm. Kitora, by contrast, displays a more dynamic visual language, a precise star chart, and unique anthropomorphic zodiac figures armed and dressed according to cosmological colour symbolism. These features suggest not passive imitation but active adaptation within the cultural and political environment of the Asuka court. By situating the murals within the broader contexts of continental migration, court-sponsored artistic production, astronomy, funerary ritual, and early state formation, the article demonstrates that the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs occupy a crucial position in the history of East Asian visual culture and in the emergence of a distinctly Japanese cosmological imagination.

Keywords: *Takamatsuzuka Tomb, Kitora Tomb, Four Gods, Funerary Art, East Asian Cosmology*

来世の色彩――高松塚古墳・キトラ古墳壁画をめぐって

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本稿は、奈良県明日香村に所在する高松塚古墳およびキトラ古墳の壁画を、七世紀後半から八世紀初頭の日本における大陸系宇宙論的図像の伝播・受容・変容を示す視覚資料として考察する。両古墳壁画は、中国・朝鮮半島の図像的系譜との関係において論じられてきたが、本稿では、それらを単なる祖型の模倣ではなく、東アジアにおいて伝播・受容された陰陽五行説を中心とする宇宙論的知識、図像モデル、絵画技法などが交錯するなかで成立した、在地的な視覚的統合として位置づける。とりわけ、四神、星宿・天文図、日月像、人物群像、ならびにキトラ古墳の十二支像に注目し、これらの図像が陰陽

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五行説を中心とする中国的宇宙論の影響を示す一方で、空間配置、色彩象徴、図像細部において日本における独自の再解釈を示していることを論じる。高松塚古墳壁画は、四神のうち現存する三神、人物群像、日月像、星宿図を組み合わせ、葬送空間を宇宙論的秩序のもとに構成している。これに対し、キトラ古墳壁画は、四神すべてが現存することに加え、東アジア最古級の天文図、および方位・色彩象徴と結びついた獣頭人身十二支像を備える点で、より体系的な図像構成を示している。以上の考察を通じて本稿は、高松塚・キトラ両古墳が、東アジア視覚文化史および日本における宇宙論的図像表現の形成過程において重要な位置を占めることを明らかにした。

キーワード： 高松塚古墳、キトラ古墳、壁画、四神図、陰陽五行説

Introduction

The mural paintings of the Takamatsuzuka 高松塚古墳 and Kitora tombs キトラ古墳 constitute two of the most important surviving examples of late seventh- to early eighth-century funerary art in Japan. Both tombs are located in Asuka, Nara Prefecture, a region closely associated with the political, ritual, and artistic transformations that accompanied the formation of the early Japanese state.

Research on the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora murals has developed across archaeology, conservation studies, and art history. Since the discovery of the Takamatsuzuka murals by Suenaga Masao and Aboshi Yoshinori in 1972, and Aboshi's later investigation of Kitora, both tombs have generated extensive debate concerning preservation, chronology, iconography, and the identity of the deceased. Japanese scholarship has particularly examined the genealogy of the Four Gods images through comparisons with Chinese, Koguryŏ, and Japanese materials, addressing issues such as compositional transformation, Buddhist influence, mural production, and possible artisanship.[2]

Building on this scholarship, the present study examines the murals of the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs not merely as distinctive masterpieces of Asuka-period painting, but as visual evidence for the circulation, reception, and transformation of cosmological imagery across East Asia. The article argues that the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora murals should be read not as derivative copies of continental prototypes, but as localised visual syntheses produced through the circulation of cosmological knowledge, artistic models, and ritual technologies across China, the Korean peninsula, and Japan. Their visual language reflects Chinese cosmological thought, including yin–yang and Five Phases concepts, but their arrangement, emphasis, and iconographic details reveal processes of mediation and reinterpretation. The differences between the frescos suggest that the two tombs participated in a shared East Asian cosmological repertoire while also embodying distinct local choices in composition and meaning.

The Continental Background of Asuka Tomb Murals

The background of the Asuka tomb murals emerged through the gradual transmission of continental knowledge to the Yamato court, especially from Korea and, later, Tang China. Elements of Daoist thought, divination practices and correlative cosmology exerted a particularly strong influence on

[2] The question of the closest formal analogies for these Japanese murals has attracted the attention of numerous art historians and archaeologists in Japan. Among the most influential scholars in the research history of the past thirty years are Donohashi Akio, Inokuchi Yoshiharu, Inokuchi Yoshiharu, Ariga Yoshitaka, Wada Atsumu, Monta Seiichi, Kitamura Takashi, Saitō Tadashi, Katō Shinji, Naoki Kōjirō, and Yamamoto Tadanao, whose monographs and other publications have played a decisive role in shaping the field.

Japanese court culture in the late seventh-early eighth century during the reigns of Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–686 AD), Empress Jitō (r. 686–697 AD), and Emperor Monmu (r. 673–686 AD) (Ooms 2008: 64). The *Nihon Shoki* presents Korean monks as key agents in this process: the Paekche monk Gwalleuk 觀勒 (Jap: *Kanroku*), who arrived in 602 AD, transmitted texts on calendrics, astronomy, geography, and cosmological arts, while the Koguryŏ monk Damjing 曇徵 (Jap: *Donchō*), sent in 610, is credited with introducing knowledge of pigment and ink production, thereby linking cosmological learning with the technical foundations of mural painting (Sakamoto 2000: 457, 464).[3] After the falls of Paekche (660 AD) and Koguryŏ (668 AD), additional Korean aristocratic artist families entered Japanese court service, and their descendants later travelled to the Tang capital to study continental art more directly. Among the Koguryŏ and Paekche immigrants of Japan, those that possessed specialised knowledge or skills were offered the opportunity to work in government offices and court-sponsored artistic workshops in their fields of expertise (Jeon 2015: 67). Against this background, the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs emerge in the late Asuka period (538–710 AD) as the earliest known Japanese burials in which Chinese (and possibly Korean) plastering and painting techniques were employed to create murals of explicitly continental cosmological content near the Fujiwara capital.

The Discovery and Excavation of the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora Tombs

The Takamatsuzuka Tomb, known from early modern Edo-period illustrated travel guides but excavated only after its rediscovery in 1972, is a two-tiered circular mound dated to c. 694–710 AD on the basis of mural style, a Tang-period bronze mirror, and Sue ware fragments from Fujiwara-kyō (Donohashi 2013: 344). Although the identity of the deceased remains disputed, the burial chamber's granite walls and ceiling preserve richly coloured murals, designated a National Treasure in 1972. The tomb was likely robbed at least once during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), at which time the southern wall of the burial chamber may have partially collapsed. Severe deterioration caused by humidity, mould, plaster flaking, and pigment fading led to the removal of the murals in 2007 and their transfer to a conservation facility; restoration was completed in spring 2020 (Matsumura and Hirose 2007; Tōkyō Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 2025).

The nearby Kitora Tomb, discovered in 1983 and probably constructed in the early eighth century, is likewise a two-tiered tumulus with murals on all four walls and the ceiling. Scholarly opinion remains divided over the identity of the occupant. Because of the damage suffered by Takamatsuzuka after early looting, Kitora was investigated cautiously, with endoscopic imaging revealing the ceiling constellations and sun and moon motifs in 1998. Its murals were removed between 2004 and 2010 and transferred to a temporary conservation facility for stabilisation and reconstruction, while the chamber and mound were restored without the paintings (Donohashi 2013: 365–366). Since 2016, the restored murals have been displayed at the Kitora Tomb Mural Experiential Museum 'Shijin no Yakata'.

The Theme and Characteristics of the Murals

In the Takamatsuzuka Tomb, three of the four mythical creatures known as the Four Gods are depicted, together with portraits of court ladies and officials, sun and moon motifs, and the twenty-eight lunar lodges. These are arranged as follows: the Dark Warrior on the north wall; the Azure Dragon, the sun motif, and the officials on the east wall; the Vermilion Bird on the south wall; the White Tiger, the moon motif, and the court ladies on the west wall; and the constellations on the ceiling. The Kitora Tomb

[3] The *Nihon Shoki* (日本書記, Chronicles of Japan), completed in 720, is Japan's first official court-compiled history and one of the principal textual sources for the political, ritual, and genealogical history of early Japan.

likewise features the Four Directional Guardians, and in this case all four murals have survived. In place of aristocratic figures, however, the side walls are decorated with the twelve mythical figures of the Chinese zodiac. Although investigations have shown that all twelve motifs were originally painted, by the time the tomb was discovered in 1983 only six of them remained in a discernible condition. The star chart on the ceiling was executed with remarkable precision, and its eastern and western sides are framed by sun and moon motifs of equal size.

The painting technique employed in the two tombs was broadly similar. As a first step, the walls of the burial chamber were covered with a thick layer of plaster; in the case of the Kitora Tomb, white clay (kaolin) was also mixed into the plaster. The next stage involved transferring the principal contour lines of the model image onto the wall surface. In the case of certain murals in the Kitora Tomb, the remains of fine incised lines suggest that the model drawing was probably pressed against the chamber wall and its outlines carefully traced with a spatula; the main contours were then painted with a thin brush. From that point onward, the procedure appears to have been the same in both tombs: coloured pigments were applied, and the linear details of the image were subsequently refined with a fine brush (Donohashi 2013: 335). The artist or artists had to work quickly, since once the plaster, pigment layers, and ink had set, the fresco reached its final state, and no later refinements were possible. The principal pigments used at the time were mineral pigments such as malachite green, azurite blue, red ochre, yellow ochre, and lead white. Natural plant-based pigments and dyes were also used. In terms of the pigments and dyes employed and the techniques of colour application, the Asuka-period tomb murals display strong similarities to the late seventh-century Buddhist wall paintings of the Main Hall at Hōryūji, while also partially corresponding to the mural traditions of Koguryŏ tombs (Donohashi 2013: 336; Akada 2014: 33).

Although the precise ethnic or institutional background of the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora painters remains unknown, the murals clearly reflect painting techniques transmitted to Asuka-period Japan from continental East Asia, especially China and Korea. The murals in the two tombs are highly similar in both scale and subject matter. In thematic terms, they are unmistakably of Chinese origin; however, differences in composition, details of the motifs, painterly style, and the pigments employed suggest that the designers and artists were at least equally strongly inspired by Korean culture, while in the Kitora Tomb specifically Japanese innovations may already be observed. The paintings of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb were executed with soft, delicate brushwork and a more subdued palette. They may be said to convey a timeless and peaceful impression. By contrast, the murals of the Kitora Tomb—especially the Directional Guardians—are rendered with rougher, more forceful lines and in a manner suggestive of movement and dynamism, as though each figure were on the verge of soaring forth from the chamber wall. Let us now examine the depicted motifs more closely.

Murals of the Four Gods

In both the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tombs, the mythical figures are depicted with similar attributes. The Guardian of the East appears as a greenish-blue mythical dragon, represented with sharp claws, a long outstretched red tongue, and elongated horns (Figure 1 and 2). On its head and fore- and hindlegs, a luxuriant mane and tufts of hair stream backward, as though the creature were in vigorous flight.



Figure 1: Line drawing of the Azure Dragon, based on the mural painting on the east wall of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb. (Created by Kitti Berta Bulyáki 2026).[4]



Figure 2: Line drawing of the Azure Dragon, based on the mural painting on the east wall of the Kitora Tomb.

[4] All illustrations included in this article were created by Kitti Berta Bulyáki in 2026 and are reproduced here with permission.

The Guardian of the South survives only in the Kitora Tomb (Figure 3). The Vermilion Bird resembles a pheasant with cinnabar-red plumage and is likewise shown in motion, as if flying.

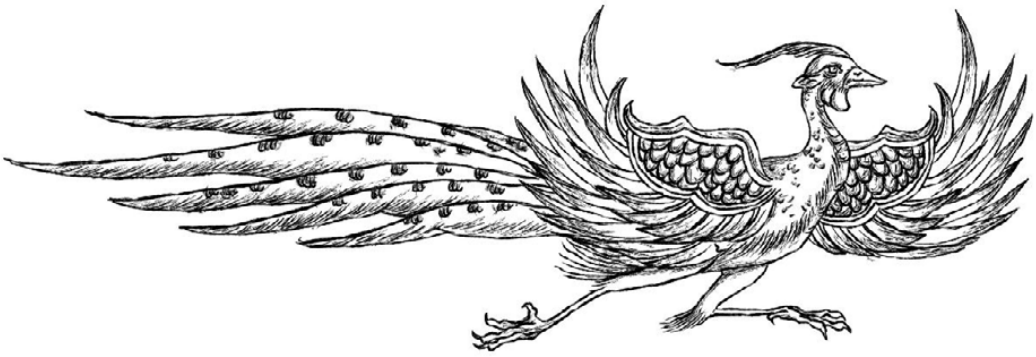

Figure 3: Line drawing of the Vermilion Bird, based on the mural painting on the south wall of the Kitora Tomb.

The elongated, slender body and serpentine neck of the Guardian of the West, decorated with black stripes, do not constitute a naturalistic representation of a tiger (Figure 4 and 5); nevertheless, its sharp claws and the pointed fangs visible in its snarling mouth still evoke the image of a ferocious beast. The thick fur along its neck and limbs is likewise swept backward.

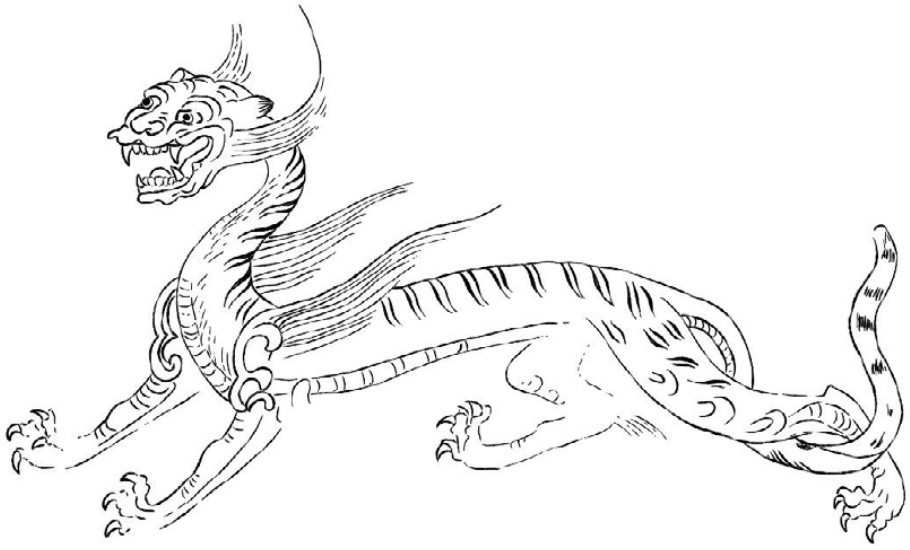

Figure 4: Line drawing of the White Tiger, based on the mural painting on the west wall of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb.



Figure 5: Line drawing of the White Tiger, based on the mural painting on the west wall of the Kitora Tomb.

The Guardian of the North consists of the intertwined forms of a turtle with an extraordinarily detailed shell pattern and an open-mouthed snake, itself rendered with equal precision (Figure 6 and 7). The two creatures face one another, while the snake coils once around the turtle. In the Kitora Tomb, grey, yellow, red, green, and black were all used in painting the snake, whereas the turtle is rendered in a yellowish tone in both tombs.



Figure 6: Line drawing of the Dark Warrior, based on the mural painting on the north wall of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb.

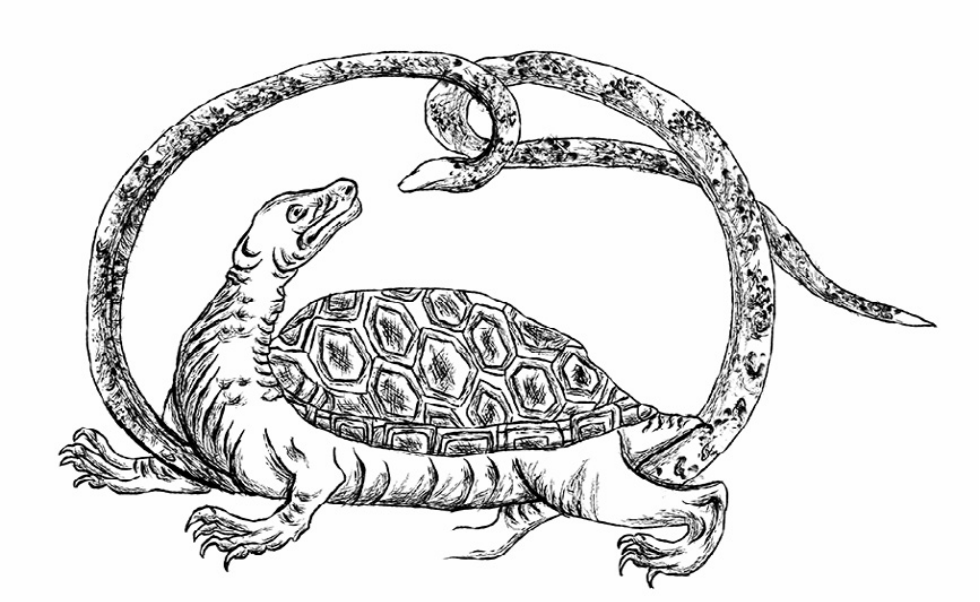

Figure 7: Line drawing of the Dark Warrior, based on the mural painting on the north wall of the Kitora Tomb.

The Four Gods 四神 (C: *Sishen*, J: *Shijin*)—the Azure Dragon 青龍 (C: *Qinlong*, J: *Seiryū*) of the East, White Tiger 白虎 (C: *Baihu*, J: *Byakko*) of the West, Vermilion Bird 朱雀 (C: *Zhuque*, J: *Suzaku*) of the South, and Dark Warrior 玄武 (C: *Xuanwu*, J: *Genbu*, a turtle and snake intertwined) of the North—formed one of the most influential cosmological systems linking political authority to sacred order across East Asia. Originating in early Chinese totemic traditions and astral beliefs, from as early as the fourth-third centuries BC, these mythical beasts were gradually integrated into the ritual codes of the Confucian tradition, which regulated the use of directional animal imagery in formal state and military rituals and ceremonies. From the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BC–9 AD; 25–220 AD) onward, they were also absorbed into broader natural-philosophical thoughts and systematised within the yin–yang 陰陽 and *wuxing* 五行 (Five Phases) theory. This system was fully integrated across funerary, ceremonial and divinatory contexts, structuring sacred space and mediating between the human and celestial realms (Loewe 1982:117–118). During this time, these deities were reconfigured as imperial symbols endowed with apotropaic and auspicious functions—capable of repelling enemies, exorcising malevolent forces, and ensuring prosperity (Inada 2003:42–43, 68–77). For instance, as a guardian deity, the Azure Dragon symbolizes the Eastern Palace of the sky, the eastern direction, and the culmination of spring. It also represents the wood phase and the beginning of the rise of yang and so on.

Chinese cosmology shaped the internal space of tombs by transforming the burial chamber into a symbolic microcosm of the universe. Based on the concept of Tianyuan difang 天圓地方 (round heaven and square earth),[5] Han-period tombs spatially distinguished the heavenly realm of the ceiling from the earthly realm represented on the walls and in subsidiary chambers. Within this cosmological structure, the Four Gods and other celestial beings were not merely decorative motifs, but visual agents of yin–

[5] In early Chinese thought, the square-shaped earth was believed to support all things, while the circular heavens arched over it like a covering (Major 1993: 32–43).

yang balance, the Five Phases, directional order, and afterlife protection. From the Eastern Han period onward, changes in tomb architecture and cosmological thought led to the relocation of the Four Gods from the ceiling to the upper registers of the side walls. This shift redefined them as directional guides who accompanied the deceased into the afterlife, while still preserving their functions as celestial guardians and seasonal symbols. As this cosmological model spread across East Asia, it was adapted in Koguryŏ, Paekche, Japan, and other regions, where local funerary traditions reinterpreted the Four Gods within their own ritual and spatial systems.

Table 1: Examples from the Correspondence System of the Five Elements Theory (Fung 1953: 19–30).

Five Phases	*Colours*	*Seasons*	*Representative deities*	*Directions*	*Yin/Yang*
Wood	Azure (Blue/Green)	Spring	Azure Dragon	East	Yang
Fire	Red	Summer	Vermilion Bird	South	Yang
Earth	Yellow/Golden	Transition between seasons	Yellow Dragon	Central	Yin and Yang
Water	Black (dark)	Winter	Dark Warrior	North	Yin
Metal	White	Autumn	White Tiger	West	Yin

In the Han-period representational tradition, the Four Gods were depicted according to a fixed directional and chromatic scheme designed to embody the circulation of yin–yang and the Five Phases. In terms of colour symbolism, each guardian was placed on the wall corresponding to its proper cardinal direction and rendered in the colour associated with that direction. A distinctive feature of the Japanese Four Gods murals is that their vivid colouration makes this Five Phases symbolism especially explicit, unlike Koguryŏ murals, where the deities are generally not shown in their prescribed symbolic colours. Yet colour was not the only aspect through which the Japanese murals reconfigured inherited continental models; their directional orientation also reveals an important reinterpretation. In the Takamatsuzuka tomb, the White Tiger on the western wall follows the standard Chinese and Korean convention by facing southward, that is, to the left. In the Kitora Tomb, however, the White Tiger faces northward, producing a composition in which all Four Gods appear to move clockwise. Donohashi (2013: 334) suggests that, while late seventh-century Japanese artists still followed the traditional Chinese representational system, the Kitora murals reflect a distinctively Japanese reinterpretation of the Four Gods' directional symbolism. Comparative evidence supports this interpretation. No known Chinese or Korean tomb mural depicts all four deities turning uniformly in the same direction, and seventh-century Tang bronze mirrors likewise do not yet show such circular movement; this rotational arrangement appears on Tang mirrors only from the very end of the eighth century under the influence of zodiac symbolism (Donohashi 2010: 52). In Japan, however, related examples indicate an earlier transformation. The Yakushi triad pedestal at Yakushi-ji likewise shows the White Tiger facing southward, as in Takamatsuzuka.[6] By contrast, a Japanese bronze mirror deposited in the Shōsōin in 756

[6] The question of whether the *honzon* of Yakushi-ji came from Moto Yakushi-ji remains debated. If the Yakushi-ji triad was produced after the temple's relocation, it dates to around 725, whereas the Moto Yakushi-ji triad dates to around 690.

AD, as well as a mirror-design sketch preserved in a 762 AD manuscript, show the beasts turning to the right and creating an impression of circular motion. Since the early eighth-century Kitora murals already display this rotational arrangement, nearly a century before comparable Chinese examples, their composition may be understood as a Japanese innovation in funerary art that later found resonance in other visual media and Tang design.

It is worth emphasising one further enigmatic feature here. In both Japanese tombs, the tails of the tiger and the dragon curl around the animals' hind legs, with the very tip of the tail rising upward in an arc. With one exception, this characteristic can be observed in every Japanese representation of the Four Gods and may therefore be regarded as a general convention of depiction in Japan. By contrast, it does not appear at all in tombs on the Korean Peninsula, while in China only a very small number of analogies are known, and these are generally unrelated to funerary art (Donohashi 2010: 46).

Murals of Court Ladies and Officials

On the western and eastern walls of the burial chamber of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb (Figures 8 and 9), four human figures were depicted on each side alongside the Four Gods. In comparison with the other murals, the level of detail and sense of movement in these paintings make them something of an exception; in this respect, they are more comparable to the lifelike and dynamic images of the Kitora Tomb. Recent material analyses of the west-wall female figure group show that the murals employed cinnabar, malachite green, and azurite blue, alongside iron-oxide pigments such as red and yellow ochre for specific garments. The study also identified complex colour layering in the blue skirt of the figure in the red garment, where blue and reddish mixed-colour areas were selectively applied to individual folds to create a striped effect. The precise nature of the red colourant in these mixed areas remains under investigation (Akada 2014: 33) Moreover, according to a report presented to the Cultural Affairs Agency committee in February 2026, the deep red pigment known as *enji* 臙脂—derived from lac insects native to Southeast and South Asia—was likely used on the jacket of one of the female figures.[7]

In thematic terms, these murals are of Chinese origin. Portraits depicting the deceased together with members of his or her retinue first appear in the tombs of the Northern Dynasties. Under the influence of the Northern Wei dynasty, numerous murals were also produced in fifth- and sixth-century Koguryŏ tombs in which high-ranking deceased individuals and their attendants were represented in contemporary dress during courtly activities such as dancing or hunting. In the Tang period, however, the custom of portraying the deceased disappeared completely; instead, images of processions composed of court ladies and officials came to be depicted on the two walls of the passage leading to the burial chamber, together with the Guardians of the East and West. These noble figures invariably held ornate fans or other ceremonial implements in their hands (Donohashi 2013: 369).

[7] The pigment analysis conducted by the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties used non-invasive visible reflectance spectroscopy to examine the garments of the female figures on the west wall of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb. The results suggest the possible use of *enji*, in the pinkish jacket of the second figure from the left and in the red garment of the adjacent figure. The pink hue may reflect either a mixture of *enji* with white lead or the fading of an originally red *enji* pigment. If confirmed, this would represent the earliest known use of *enji* as a pictorial pigment in Japan, preceding the eighth-century examples preserved in the Shōsōin. https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/local/kansai/news/20260226-GYO1T00071/



Figure 8: Line drawing of female figures on the east wall of the Takamatsuzuka tomb.



Figure 9: Line drawing of female figures on the west wall of the Takamatsuzuka tomb, commonly known as the 'Asuka Bijin' (飛鳥美人).

The figures, who appear to be conversing with one another rather than merely standing in rigid frontal poses, wear colourful aristocratic robes as they proceed in procession, while holding ornate period fans and ritual batons in their hands. The cheerful ceremonial character and dynamic quality of the murals do not evoke the image of a mournful funeral procession; rather, they suggest that the scene might equally be understood as a view of an important court ceremony actually held at the Fujiwara capital. The composition bears a striking resemblance to the mural in the tomb of Princess Yongtai in China, almost as though it were a reduced-scale version of it. One notable difference, however, must be pointed out: the clothing of the noble ladies and gentlemen is not the same (Figure 10). It may be assumed that the robes worn by all of the figures reflect contemporary court dress of the Asuka period. If one closely observes the pleating of the skirt-like lower garment worn beneath the short women's robes, it becomes apparent that this mode of rendering costume also appears in a detail of the Tenjukoku shūchō 天寿国繍帳 embroidered textile produced in 622 AD (housed at Chūgūji, Nara, National Treasure); moreover, similarly styled garments may also be seen in the murals of court ladies in the Koguryŏ tombs of Muyongchong 舞踊塚 (Ji'an, China) and Susan-ri 水山里 (Nampo, North Korea), constructed in the fifth and sixth centuries. Although the Japanese composition on the western and eastern walls of the burial chamber was clearly created under the influence of Tang-period representational traditions, the placement of the murals within the chamber, their distinctive coloration, and the style of the clothing all demonstrate that they were executed from a Japanese perspective and according to a specifically Japanese interpretation. Furthermore, the attire of the court ladies suggests that Asuka-period court fashion for both women and men—although fundamentally shaped in accordance with Tang Chinese regulations on court dress—may also have been influenced by somewhat earlier Koguryŏ fashions (Donohashi 2010: 18).



Figure 10: Line drawing of male courtiers on the east and west walls of the Takamatsuzuka.

Astronomical Symbols (the Twenty-Eight Ancient Chinese Lunar lodges, and the Sun and Moon Motifs)

Ancient Chinese astronomy combined cosmological, astrological, and political functions, interpreting celestial phenomena as signs of events in the human world (Smith 2015: 11). Its system of twenty-eight lunar lodges (二十八宿) was integrated into Han cosmology, in which each of the Four Gods presided over seven mansions within one celestial quarter (Hashimoto 1998: 16). This astral-cosmological scheme entered funerary culture and was later transmitted to Koguryŏ and Japan. The Takamatsuzuka ceiling presents a symbolic arrangement of the lunar lodges in four groups associated with the Four Gods, while the Kitora ceiling offers a far more detailed star chart, with sixty-eight constellations and approximately 350 stars. In both the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora murals, the stars were rendered in gold foil and connected by red lines; in Takamatsuzuka the circular stars measure approximately 9 mm in diameter, whereas in Kitora the design was first incised onto the uneven surface of the central granite ceiling slab before the larger and smaller stars were applied in gold foil. Moreover, Kitora appears to reflect actual astronomical observation and is generally regarded as the oldest surviving star chart in the world (Hashimoto 1998: 13–14). Recent scholarship suggests that its prototype may have derived from Koguryŏ, possibly transmitted to Japan through Korean astronomical learning recorded in the *Nihon shoki*.

Turning from the constellations to solar and lunar symbolism, the sun and moon motifs further reveal how the pictorial programme of the tomb was structured according to Chinese cosmological principles (Figures 11 and 12). The sun was associated with the eastern direction, yang force, and the Azure Dragon, whereas the moon was linked to the western direction, yin force, and the White Tiger. While sun and moon motifs were never depicted on the side walls of burial chambers in China or on the Korean Peninsula, in the Japanese Takamatsuzuka Tomb these celestial bodies appear above the figures of the Four Gods, close to the ceiling plane, enveloped in a striking sea of red cloud-bands interspersed with small green mountains.

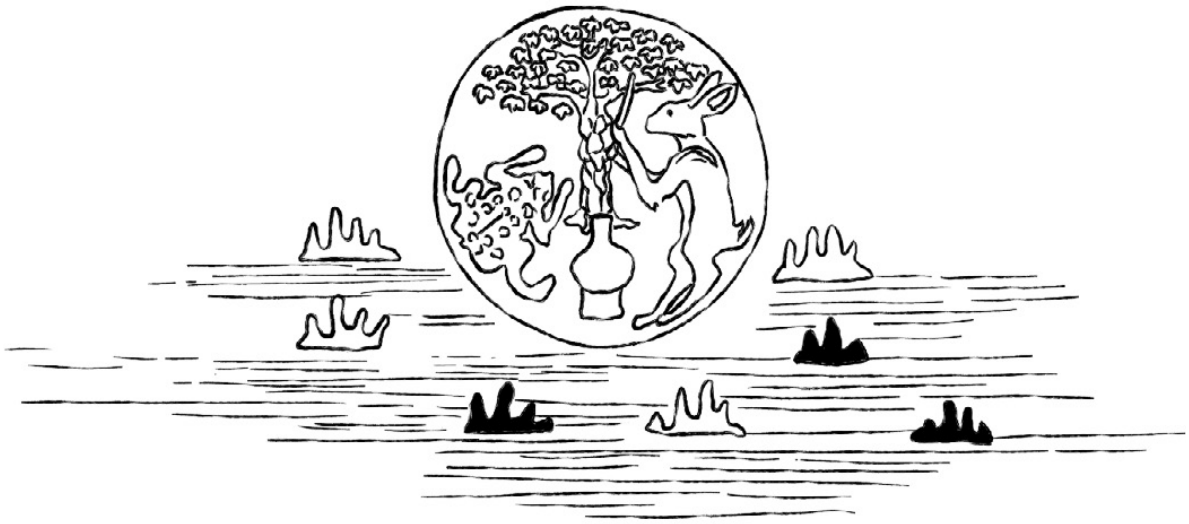

Figure 11: Line drawing of the moon motif (Takamatsuzuka tomb, west wall).



Figure 12: Line drawing of sun motif (Takamatsuzuka tomb, east wall).

This form of 'landscape representation' shows certain similarities to details found in the paintings of the Tamamushi Shrine at Hōryūji temple, dating to the mid-seventh century. In the Kitora Tomb, by contrast, these symbols were placed on the eastern and western sides of the descending edge of the ceiling, framing the exceptionally detailed star chart, of which they do not form an integral part. Here too, the celestial bodies, painted in gold and silver, emerge from a sea of clouds, but the rendering of the clouds differs. Against a background of more loosely spaced, paler red lines, one sees blurred red pigment below and roughly indicated green mountain peaks, creating a far more lifelike, mist-like effect. This painterly style, characterised by such gradation of colour, was probably adopted by Japanese artists under the influence of early Tang Chinese painting, and it may also be observed in the backgrounds of the Buddhist murals in the Golden Hall of Hōryūji (Donohashi 2010: 23-25).

The Twelve Signs of the Chinese Zodiac

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, time is organized into recurring sixty-year cycles formed by the interaction of the Heavenly cycle of the Five Phases and yin–yang forces with the Earthly cycle of the twelve zodiacal animals 十二支.[8] Each zodiacal sign is linked to specific cosmological correspondences—element, direction, cardinal deity, colour, and yin–yang quality—creating a system that renews annually and completes its full cycle every sixty years. This system of temporal and directional correspondences provides the conceptual background for the arrangement of the zodiac figures in the Kitora Tomb.

In China, the convention of representing the twelve zodiac signs together with the Four Gods and celestial bodies in elite tombs emerged during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, initially with zodiac animals painted on tomb ceilings (Donohashi 2013: 354). From the Sui and Tang periods, anthropomorphic zodiac figures—human-bodied, animal-headed, and dressed as officials—appeared in funerary figurines, although this form became common in Chang'an and Luoyang only from the mid- to late eighth century. Tang bronze mirrors, by contrast, continued to depict the zodiac exclusively in animal form. Zodiac imagery also became prominent in eighth- and ninth-century Silla royal tombs,

[8] The zodiacal animals, in order, are as follows: Rat (子), Ox (丑), Tiger (寅), Rabbit (卯), Dragon (辰), Snake (巳), Horse (午), Goat (未), Monkey (申), Rooster (酉), Dog (戌), and Pig (亥).

where the signs were carved as anthropomorphic guardian figures dressed as armed generals, probably under the influence of Buddhist art (Lim 2017: 2; Lim 2018: 168). In Paekche, however, zodiac representation remained rare and limited: in examples such as the tomb stone of King Muryeong, the signs appear only as written Chinese characters engraved on tomb stones, rather than as animal or anthropomorphic images (Gongju National Museum 2013).



Figure 13: Line drawing of the Ox (north wall), Horse (south wall) and Tiger (east wall) zodiac (Kitora tomb).

Against this broader East Asian background, the six surviving zodiac murals in the Kitora Tomb are, on the basis of current knowledge, entirely unique for the period. At present, no tomb mural is known anywhere in East Asia from the seventh or eighth century in which such mythical animals were depicted in anthropomorphic form and holding weapons in their hands, whether in China or on the Korean Peninsula (Donohashi 2013: 300). The zodiac figures in the Kitora Tomb are thought to have been arranged three to each side wall, at roughly the same height and at regular intervals, slightly below the centre of the walls on which the Four Gods were painted. They are depicted in the lower register of the side walls in standing posture, with human bodies clad in simple aristocratic robes, animal heads, and weapons held in their hands. In addition, each zodiac figure wears garments in the colour corresponding to the cardinal direction and deity with which it is associated. This distinctive mode of representation, which emerged in Asuka half a century before the Silla relief sculptures and was presumably influenced by Sui- and early Tang-period tomb figurines, occupies an intermediate position between the artistic styles of the two regions. Certain elements—such as the symbolic colours of the garments and the pairing of anthropomorphic zodiac figures with the Four Gods—may be regarded as entirely original Japanese interpretations (Donohashi 2010: 38–39).

Although the twelve zodiac figures in the Kitora Tomb survive in varying states of preservation, the Rat, Ox, Tiger, Horse, Dog, and Boar remain identifiable (Figure 13). Among these, the Tiger is particularly well preserved, and its entire body is visible; it measures approximately 95 mm in width and 155 mm in height. The areas where the Rabbit, Goat, and Rooster are presumed to have been located have been completely lost together with the plaster, while the Dragon, Snake, and Monkey were covered with mud and could not be confirmed with the naked eye. However, recent X-ray fluorescence

analysis of the distribution of mercury and other elements thought to have been contained in the mural pigments has clarified their specific forms, including the outline of the Snake (Figure 14), which remains invisible to visual inspection. Beneath the paintings, incised traces left when the contour lines of the original model drawing were transferred onto the wall remain visible, a technique frequently employed in decorated tombs of the Tang period (Osako 2024).



Figure 14: Line drawing of the Snake Zodiac (Kitora tomb, south wall) Based on Osako 2024:37.

Conclusion

The Takamatsuzuka and Kitora murals occupy a central place in the history of early Japanese funerary art. Created near the Fujiwara capital at the turn of the eighth century, they are the earliest surviving Japanese examples in which continental painting techniques were used to construct a richly developed cosmological space within the tomb chamber.

Their imagery—the Four Gods, astral symbols, sun and moon motifs, courtly figures, and, in Kitora, the twelve zodiac signs—clearly reflects the transmission of Chinese cosmological thought through East Asian networks. Yet these murals were not merely copied from Chinese or Korean models. Takamatsuzuka preserves several earlier continental conventions, while Kitora reveals more pronounced local innovation, especially in the clockwise arrangement of the Four Gods, the detailed star chart, and the anthropomorphic zodiac figures.

Together, the two tombs show that Asuka-period funerary art developed within a shared East Asian cosmological repertoire, but through specifically Japanese modes of selection and reinterpretation. The burial chamber was transformed into a microcosmic space where direction, time, celestial order, and afterlife protection were visually integrated. In this sense, the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora murals offer crucial evidence for the reception and localisation of continental cosmology in early Japan.

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