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Study on the development of ancient Japanese turtle motifs

Turtles and tortoises¹ hold great significance in many ancient cultures. Often perceived as the foundation for the beginning of things or an emblem of cosmos, they have a sacred role in mythologies, legends and folklore around the world, especially so in East and Southeast Asia. In Chinese culture, turtles are generally viewed as a symbol of longevity, endurance, stability and wisdom because of their long lifespan and unique appearance (round, domed upper shell and flat undershell, that resembles the ancient Han concept of round, domed sky and flat earth). (Allan 1991)

In Japan, the turtle and/or tortoise has developed an independent tradition. In traditional Japanese culture, turtles, with a tail made of seaweed and algae (*minogame* 蓑亀) can be seen not only as a sacred symbol of several legendary deities, but also as a symbol of good luck and support.² The earliest concept of *minogame* in the first written Urashima Taro tales is influenced by a mix of Daoist thought and Confucianism. Accompanied by a crane or a snake, the turtle or tortoise is a favored auspicious motif appearing in Japanese visual arts, crafts and even in modern-day popular culture. The turtle-crane pairing is a favored motif by netsuke-

¹ Although biologically speaking, turtles and tortoises have distinct differences, in this paper, the generic word 'turtle' is used to describe both animals.

² Turtle motif is also used in geomancy; it carries on its back the legendary three mountains of the Land of the Daoist Immortals. (Ooms 2009)

carvers and other artisans, and is featured in traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies. Another well-known motif is connected to the Myōken cult³ of Eastern Japan. Especially during medieval times, Japanese people worshipped Myōken bodhisattva, a Buddhist patron deity portrayed as a young figure, holding a sword and standing on a turtle. (Ball 2004)

Previous research studies conducted by art historians mainly focus on the above-mentioned medieval or early modern depictions of the Japanese turtle motifs. The author of this paper will put emphasis on a research that examines these motifs up until the 7th century. Besides turtle-shaped objects, turtle motifs can be found on earthenware pottery, bronze bells, bronze mirrors, stone structures, carvings, wall paintings and other artifacts from prehistoric and ancient Japan. How did people who lived in the Japanese archipelago during prehistoric and ancient times depict these animals? What cultural factors influenced the development of these peculiar motifs and mysteriously-shaped objects? The author will explore early Japanese depictions of turtles and turtles from the late Jōmon period to the Asuka period.

Jōmon period

Jōmon people were prehistoric foragers who lived from about 14,000 B.C. to 800~300 B.C. in certain parts of the Japanese archipelago. As they lived in coexistence with nature, Jōmon people had a rich spiritual world. Expressions of Jōmon spirituality were given material form in numerous items such as clay figurines (dogū), clay tablets, ritual vessels, pots and smaller clay objects with unique characteristics. Although many Jōmon vessels are plain, around half have decoration of some kind, most typically cord- or rope-like lines with regional differences. During middle Jōmon, new shapes of pottery appeared that served specific functions (e.g. rituals). Among middle and late Jōmon decorated vessels of Eastern Japan, there are a few patterns that might symbolize an animal, very rarely, a turtle-frog hybrid animal. Such clay pots were found at Tonai site (藤内遺跡) in Nagano prefecture and at Kaminoiri-B site (上ノ入 B 遺跡) in Kanagawa prefecture and were presumably produced to make fermented alcoholic drinks. (Senda 2008) The entity represented on these artifacts may not necessarily be a real frog or a turtle, but something spiritual beyond a specific form. Noguchi suggested that the decorative animals of the middle Jōmon period are totems and were not necessarily associated with agriculture. (Noguchi 1965)

³ Myōken is thought to have originated from Chinese Daoist and folk beliefs and as a god of the Pole Star and/or the Big Dipper, it has played an important role in Japanese Buddhism from the Heian period.

Fully animal-shaped hollow clay objects have been made mainly throughout the middle, late and final-phase Jōmon period, and are not similar to East Asian pottery styles of the same time period. There are two major terms used by Japanese archeologists for categorizing enigmatic animal figures: the most general term is *kamegata doseihin* (亀形土製品 lit. 'turtle-shaped clay object') but some scholars⁴ tend to use *kamegata dogū* (亀形土偶 lit. 'turtle-shaped clay figurine') more frequently in recent years. Oddly enough, some of these kamegata figures look quite mysterious. They can symbolize any kind of ancient animal; not only turtles, but frogs, sea animals (e.g. seals), birds, hybrids or any kind of abstract spiritual being. Most of them were found in the Kantō and Tōhoku⁵ regions of Japan; however, 2 figurines were excavated from cemetery sites in Hokkaido as well. (Senda 2008)

These hollow unglazed clay objects were made in 3 different types in the Jōmon period:

- Type A: full form, an oval body with a head and limbs („hands” and „legs”)
- Type B: an oval body with a head and only one pair of the limbs („hands” or „legs”)
- Type C: an oval body with a head, no limbs attached (C/a) or several limbs attached (C/b)

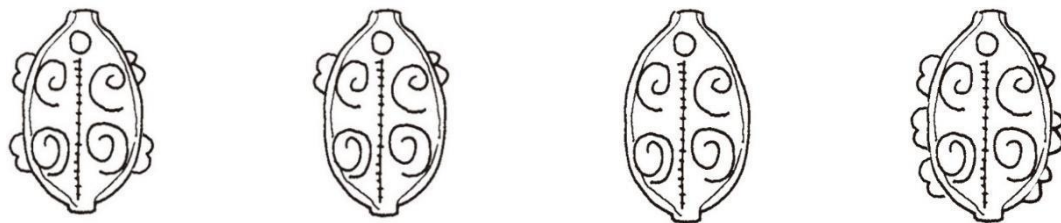


Figure 1: Type A, B, C/a and C/b of kamegata hollow clay figurines (from left to right)⁶

The biggest kamegata figurines are 12+ cm long, 9+ cm wide, their average size are 8~12 cm long and about 6 cm wide, and there are small objects as well measuring ~8 cm in length and 4 cm in width. Iwate prefecture, Akita prefecture and the whole Kantō region (Nagano, Kanagawa, Tokyo, Chiba, Saitama) have figurines in all 3 sizes. Big and small figurines were excavated only from Aomori prefecture. Average sized and small objects were found only in Yamagata prefecture. While figurines excavated from Tōhoku have various imaginative and

⁴ Shigehiko Narita (2016, 2017) should be mentioned, among others.

⁵ Except for Miyagi prefecture, where no kamegata figure was found so far. (Senda 2008)

⁶ Digital lineart made by the author based on all known pictures of kamegata hollow clay figurines. Without aiming to give an exhaustive list of all unique sub-types, these pictures illustrate the 3 major designs of kamegata objects.

creative patterns, Kantō patterns are rather similar (or do not have decoration at all). Most turtle-shaped objects uniformly feature 2 (or rarely 3) bored holes. (Narita 2016)

One of the earliest enigmatic animal figures from the middle~late Jōmon period is ‘Bibi-chan’ as Japanese researchers named it. It was excavated at the Bibi 4 Site (美々遺跡) in Chitose City, Hokkaido Prefecture, hence the name ‘Bibi-chan’. This 31.7 cm long and 16.2 cm wide hollow unglazed clay figurine might have been modeled after a turtle or an imaginary sea spirit; however, it is hard to tell what the artist intended it to be. (Senda 2008) Interestingly, the shape of the object is similar to those that were found in Eastern Japan, but its design is clearly different.

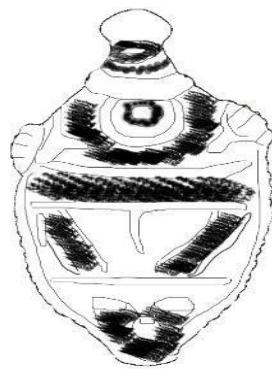


Figure 2: Lineart of ‘Bibi-chan’ figurine (type B)⁷

Presumably, one of the earliest clearly turtle-shaped dogū was excavated from the Nagatake Site (長竹遺跡) in Kazo City, Saitama Prefecture. Accompanied by a dog and a wild boar, this obvious example of a river turtle (about 8 cm in length) was made approximately 3,500–3,000 years ago at the end of the late Jōmon period. The detailing of the body and facial features had not become specific enough yet (type C), but the simple workmanship captures the key features of a real turtle.

In the Final Jōmon period, Kamegaoka-pottery was made in present-day Aomori prefecture. Besides magatama jewels and lacquered serving wares, archeologists excavated small kamegata figurines (type C) from the Kamegaoka site (亀ヶ岡遺跡)⁸. Most of these figurines have a typical characteristic: a C-shaped pattern can be observed on both sides that is fairly similar to the popular *warabite* pattern⁹ of later time periods. Turtle-shaped relics of Iwate

⁷ Lineart made by the author based on the pictures of the original relic, housed at Hokkaido Archeological Operations Center, Hokkaido.

⁸ The Kamegaoka remains are among the largest known Jōmon settlements in Japan.

⁹ Japanese warabite pattern (蕨手文) is a bracken-shaped, scroll-like pattern.

prefecture have the same warabite-like decoration; however, each piece has a unique design. (Senda 2008)



Figure 3: Kamegata figurine¹⁰ from a Ninohe city site, Iwate prefecture (type C – Late Jōmon) 19.6 cm in length



Figure 4: Kamegata figurine¹¹ from Ebaradai site (江原台遺跡), Chiba prefecture (type B – Late Jōmon) 14.3cm in length

Yayoi period

According to archeological evidence, the Final Jōmon culture is succeeded by the Yayoi culture (dated from 900/400 BC to 300 AD), a new agricultural-based culture first in Kyūshū, Shikoku and the southern extremes of Honshu. (Mizoguchi 2013) Cultural features (e.g. cultivation of rice, establishment of settled communities) and advanced techniques in metallurgy (manufacturing bronze and iron objects) were introduced from China via the Korean peninsula to these regions. Later, Yayoi culture extended up to the center and eastern part of Honshu as well. Metal objects (iron tools, bronze blades and mirrors) were first imported from Korea and Han China, but as the culture extended from Kyūshū to northeastern regions, metal objects were beginning to be locally made. Primarily in the western and southwestern areas, Japanese bronze bells (*dōtaku*) with archaic designs can be found. (Mason 2004, Senda 2008)

In Japan, bronze was used by certain clans for ritual and ceremonial artifacts, as these items were markers of status. While – as evidenced by the grave goods in late settlements – Yayoi craftsmen had taken on advanced metalworking technologies from most likely Korea, the simple animal images depicted on clapperless Japanese bronze bells are not of Korean (or Chinese) origin. Very simple reliefs, incised figural motifs of middle-late Yayoi period *dōtaku*

¹⁰ Housed at Tenri University, Tenrisankokan Museum, Nara. Photograph was taken by the author at the 165th Tenri Gallery Exhibition „Inori no kokogaku” (祈りの考古学) in 2018.

¹¹ Housed at Meiji University Museum (明治大学博物館). Digital lineart made by the author based on photos of the original relic.

show us how Yayoi people imagined animals in their daily life and spiritual world. The styles and the height of the bells varied greatly. (Mizoguchi 2013) Dōtaku with turtle decoration have been found mainly in the Kansai region (Shiga and Hyōgo), the Tokai District (Shimane), the Chūbu region (Fukui) and Shikoku (Kagawa). (Senda 2008)

Among other objects, fourteen middle Yayoi period (2nd century BC- 1st century AD) bronze bells were excavated at Sakuragaoka Site in Kobe in 1964.¹² Among these dōtaku, No. 1, No.4 and No. 5 should be mentioned, because – in a certain manner - the simply depicted motifs of turtles are probably one of the first archaic turtle drawings in Japanese art history. Another valuable artifact is a bronze bell¹³ dated to the late Yayoi period (presumably) from Kagawa Prefecture, depicting daily life, animals and plants. In the middle tier of blocks, there is a rather simply executed turtle, accompanied by two cranes. Another „sticklike” turtle figure can be observed in the bottom tier with a salamander. Turtle shells were depicted with two carved lines that is considered to be a new drawing style in the Kansai region. (Senda 2008) On closer inspection of toes and head shapes, these patterns might have been formed as a Chinese softshell turtle (スッポン).¹⁴ However, due to their seaside location the bronze bells of Shimane prefecture in Tōkai region are believed to depict sea turtles instead.

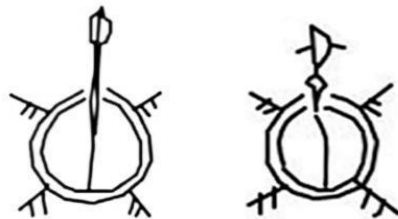


Figure 5: Examples of turtle patterns discovered on Sakuragaoka bronze bells¹⁵

¹² Housed at Kōbe City Museum (神戸市立博物館) in Kōbe, Hyōgo prefecture.

¹³ Housed at Tokyo National Museum (東京国立博物館) in Tokyo.

¹⁴ Chinese soft-shelled turtles are found in fresh and brackish waters (rivers, lakes, ponds, canals, etc.) throughout Japan.

¹⁵ Digital lineart made by the author based on patterns of Sakuragaoka bells. (Senda 2008)



Figure 6: Sea turtle pattern on a bronze bell found in Shimane prefecture¹⁶

Yet another valuable turtle depiction can be found on vessel fragments excavated from a big scale moat-surrounded Yayoi settlement called Karako Kagi ruins (唐古鍵遺跡) in Nara prefecture. The site is known to be a major place where bronze bells were produced and where clay vessels and jade accessories of different regions (but mostly Kansai region) were carried in. Large amounts of pottery with carved line pictures (e.g. buildings, animals, people) drawn on them were unearthed. On the top half of the body of one particular vase, a tower, deers and two human figures (possibly shaman figures) wearing animal costumes are all drawn in sequence. Scholars believe that the person in the bird costume is a female shaman performing a ritual and she is accompanied by a male performer in turtle costume. (Senda 2008) From the Yayoi period, turtle motifs started to appear in depictions of everyday life and ritual scenes, they became a valuable part of symbolic story-telling.

While turtle motifs of bronze bells and clay vessels are definitely not of mainland Asian origin, Chinese and Korean artistic influence is obvious on the engraved figures of the so-called TLV-style bronze mirrors (方格規矩鏡).¹⁷ The mystical connotations of ancient East Asian bronze mirrors can be seen from the patterns and inscriptions molded into the backs. Several Japanese mirrors were made in Chinese Han style and are usually depicting the four cardinal deities of ancient Chinese mythology.¹⁸ (Okamura 2017) On TLV-style mirrors, the four guardians' lineart were created above the pillar motifs, between the knob and the border, suggesting that these supernatural beings belong to Heaven and represent constellations in the

¹⁶ Photograph was taken by the author at Shimane Museum of Ancient Izumo (島根県立古代出雲歴史博物館), Izumo city, Shimane prefecture (2014).

¹⁷ Japanese bronze mirrors were either imported from China, manufactured in the Korean peninsula or created on the Japanese peninsula. Yayoi mirrors were first treated as both ritual and luxury goods by the local elite, then later, Han-style bronze mirrors became mortuary goods in Japan as well. (Okamura 2017)

¹⁸ The cult of the Four Guardians originates in Chinese totemic traditions. From the 11th century BC, they became associated with the 28 ancient Chinese constellations and were regarded as mythical deities who ruled the segments of the sky. From the Han period, the guardians were considered symbols that could exorcize evil spirits and bring good fortune. (Lázár 2018)

four quarters of the universe. One of the legendary figures, the Guardian of the North called 'Dark Warrior' (玄武), is a fusion of the intertwined figures of a turtle with a highly detailed shell pattern, and an open-mouthed snake. The intertwining of the two motifs was a symbol not only of long life and fertility, but also of the balance of yin and yang, heaven and earth. The Dark Warrior motif is an important part of the design that symbolically express the cosmology of ancient China. The symbolic meaning and the peculiar look of the Dark Warrior became even more important in the following centuries. (Lazar 2018)



Figure 7: A relief of 'Dark Warrior' on a Han Chinese bronze mirror¹⁹

Kofun period

Between the mid-third and early sixth century, numerous tombs were built as burial mounds for clan leaders, the most enormous of which is the key-hole shaped Daisen kofun in Osaka. A variety of hollow *haniwa* clay figures —representing humans and animals (horses, deers, water birds, dogs, forest animals etc.) among other things—were placed on the top of tombs along the edges. Reserachers have proposed various theories on the functions of clay figurines but have not reached a consensus due to the lack of proper evidence. Although they are the most frequent funerary objects in the Kofun period, to the best knowledge of the author, not a single turtle shaped haniwa was found so far. Many ornaments were buried inside a tomb: typical ornaments were bronze mirrors (often depicting the Dark Warrior), weapons like swords and armor and earthenware ornaments.

Although Japanese *sue* ware (須恵器) with natural ash glaze - first produced in the mid-fifth century - is of ancient Chinese origin, its direct predecessor is the blue-gray stoneware pottery of Gaya confederacy in southern Korea. During the late Kofun period, it is assumed that

¹⁹ Photograph was taken by the author at Ikikoku Museum (一伎国博物館), Iki Island, Japan (2014).

a certain amount of turtle-shaped sue pottery (*kamegata-hei* 亀形瓶) was made in southern regions of Japan. However, it must have been quite rare, as only 2 turtle-shaped vessels have been found so far. One of them - measuring 18.7cm in length, 17.5cm wide, 12.6cm height - was excavated from Hitotsumachi Tomb in Akitakata, Hiroshima, and is believed to have been made in the first half of the 7th century.



Figure 8: Replica of the kamegata jar of Hitotsumachi Tomb²⁰

The other object was found during the excavation work of the Funahara Tomb No. 4 in Koga, Fukuoka in Kyushu. The *sagebe*-type (堤瓶形) turtle-shaped hanging jar has a circular body with one flat and one spherical side; a short neck expanding towards a mouth; two round handles placed on the shoulders; and decorated with fine incised spiral lines. The Funahara Tomb also yielded gilt bronze *uzu* (雲珠) items with a turtle design.²¹ Uzu ornaments were discovered in the fully excavated royal tomb of King Naemul of Silla as well (皇南大塚).



Figure 9: Turtle-shaped horse trapping of Funahara Tomb (Late Kofun period)²²

²⁰ Photograph was taken by Zsófia Imai for the author at the Special Exhibition „Miwaku no kodai akusesarii” (魅惑の古代アクセサリー) of Miyoshi Fudoki no oka Museum (みよし風土記の丘ミュージアム) in Miyoshi, Hiroshima prefecture (2020. 11.18.) Used with permission. The original artifact was in private collection but currently housed at Akitakata city Museum of Local History (安芸高田市 歴史民俗博物館) in Hiroshima prefecture.

²¹ Uzu are generally circular ornaments (about 2 cm in diameter) hung at the top of the horses' tail.

²² Photograph was taken by the author at the Kyushu Historical Museum (九州歴史資料館) in 2018.

Another rare piece of ornamental gilt bronze horse trappings should also be introduced here. It was excavated from Sasazuka tomb in Iki Island²³ (Nagasaki prefecture) and was clearly formed as a Chinese softshell turtle. Scholars said it was rare for ancient trappings to be found in such good condition in Japan. This item was designed to decorate a horse's head.



Figure 10: Turtle-shaped horse trappings (龜形飾金具) from the late Kofun period, housed at Ikikoku Museum (Iki Island)²⁴

Asuka period

The Asuka period was a time of transformation for Japanese society. It is named for the Asuka area at the southern end of the Yamato Basin, which was the political and cultural center of the country at the time. During this period of intensive peninsular contact, many Korean artisans skilled in metalwork, sculpture and painting immigrated to (or were brought to) Japan. Many cultural and artistic influences during this period originated in China, but were adapted in Goguryeo or Baekje before reaching Japan.²⁵ Moreover, imperial Japanese envoys who visited Sui and Tang China in the 7th century, came back to Japan with excellent artistic skills and introduced new artistic styles and themes of the Sui and Tang period. Intense contact with China and Korean kingdoms transformed Japanese art, so it doesn't come as a surprise that Chinese

²³ Numerous artifacts from the Yayoi and Kofun period have been found by archeologists at Iki Island.

²⁴ Photograph was taken by the author at the Ikikoku Museum (一支国博物館), Iki Island, Japan (2014).

²⁵ Especially in the second half of the 7th century, during the reigns of Tenmu, Jitō and Monmu, Daoist philosophy (cosmological traditions) had a significant influence on the culture of the Japanese court, which by then had incorporated Buddhist elements to its ancient Shintō rituals. In addition to the Chinese classics imported to Japan from the 5th century via Korea, the growing popularity of Chinese (and Korean) geomancy also contributed to the integration of several cosmological principles into the culture of the Japanese court.

and Korean turtle depictions heavily influenced Japanese turtle images and turtle-shaped sculptures and decorations during the 6th to 8th centuries.

The most advanced techniques of burial mound decoration- influenced by Chinese and Korean tradition - date from the late 7th to the early 8th century and can be found in present-day Asuka village (Nara Prefecture). There are two tumuli with walls plastered with Chinese/Korean techniques and then decorated with turtle paintings, among other things: the Takamatsuzuka²⁶ and Kitora tumulus²⁷.

Both tombs depict the so-called Four Guardian deities²⁸ with similar attributes. The figure of the Guardian of the North, called the Dark Warrior, appears in its traditional Chinese iconographic style; it is a fusion of intertwined figures of a turtle and a snake. The two animals face each other, the snake wraps itself once around the turtle. The image in the Takamatsuzuka tumulus is characterized by soft, delicate (yet fluently executed) brushwork and by a more faded palette. In contrast, the Dark Warrior fresco in Kitora is rougher, with strong, powerful lines. Gray, yellow, red, green and black were used to paint the snake in the Kitora tumulus, while the turtle in both tombs is grayish-yellowish in color. The snake of Takamatsuzuka was colored with a faded greenish color. Both depictions give the mythical guardian figure character and a sense of vitality. The remains of thin scratch marks on the north wall of Kitora tomb indicate that the model image of the Dark Warrior was probably pressed onto the clay wall and the preliminary outlines of the model were carefully carved out with a spatula, then painted with a thin brush in ink. After that, the colored dye materials were applied and finally, the dark outline was worked with a thin brush. (Donohashi 2013) In terms of the pigments and color treatment techniques used, the Dark Warrior fresco of Takamatsuzuka and Kitora kofun are partly identical to the tumulus frescoes of Goguryeo.

²⁶ Based on archeological evidence, Takamatsuzuka tomb was probably built between 694 and 710.

²⁷ The four walls and ceiling of the burial chamber are decorated with colorful frescoes, the themes and depictions of which suggest that Kitora tomb was probably built in the first decade of the 8th century and is one of the last tumuli to be constructed.

²⁸ Being intertwined with taoist cosmological traditions (such as the Five Phases theory and the yin-yang philosophy), the Four Guardians became an increasingly popular part of the Chinese tradition. The decoration of the deities had not only a decorative function, they were also an essential part of the cosmic space artificially created inside the tombs. Besides funerary traditions, they were also widely depicted on the backs of cast-bronze mirrors or carved on lacquer ware, bricks, tiles, and seals. The tradition of depicting the Four Guardians became popular in many East Asian regions. In the 5th century it spread to the ancient kingdoms of the Korean peninsula (especially to Goguryeo) and later to Japan in the Asuka period.

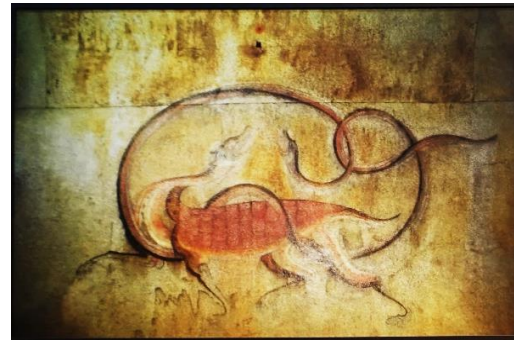
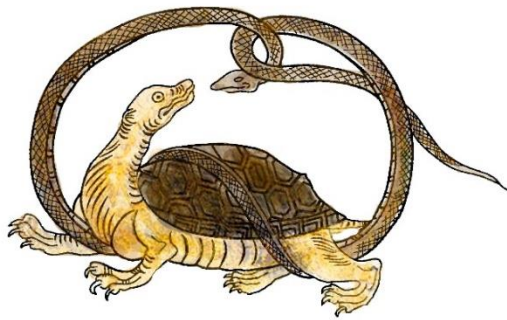


Figure 11: Dark Warrior fresco of Kitora tomb, Asuka²⁹ Figure 12: Replica of the Dark Warrior mural painting of Gangseo Great Tomb (江西大墓)³⁰

– 7th century

Color	Name and source of the pigment powder (natural dyes)	Tumuli of Goguryeo (5-7th century)	Tumuli of Asuka (7-8th century)
red, burgundy	vermilion (<i>from cinnabar</i>)	X	X
	bengala (<i>from Iron(III) oxide</i>)	X	X
	burgundy		X
	reddish brown (<i>from manganese-rich soil</i>)		X
blue / green	azure blue, bluish green (<i>mixture of malachite and azurite</i>)		X
	greyish green (<i>from glauconite</i>)	X	
	ultramarine blue (<i>from lazurite</i>)		X
	green (<i>from the leaves of the soapnut tree</i>)		X
	patina green (<i>from Copper II carbonate</i>)		
black	black (<i>from coal</i>)		X
	grayish brown (<i>from coal and magnetite</i>)	X	X
white	lead white (<i>from white lead</i>)	X	X
	white (<i>from mussel shells</i>)		X
	white (for plastering) (<i>from kaolin</i>)		X
	white (<i>from minium</i>)		X
	white (<i>from calcium carbonate</i>)		
yellow	yellowish brown (<i>from clay colored with iron oxide or lead(II) oxide</i>)	X	X

²⁹ Digital art made by the author based on the original fresco.

³⁰ Photograph of a replica was taken by the author at the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, South Korea (September, 2014). The first replica copied around 1930. The walls of the chamber room do not have any patterns or design except for the Four Guardians, which are painted extensively across the center of the wall.

	orange, yellowish red (<i>from realgar</i>)	X	X
	yellow (<i>from quartz</i>)		

Table 1.: Raw materials of the pigments and plasters used in the tombs of Goguryeo and the tombs of Asuka, Japan (Lázár 2020:241 ; based on the research of Mori 1982, Aoki 2012, Kōzuma 2013, Sekino 1970)

Another rare Japanese depiction of the Dark Warrior is found on the pedestal of the Yakushi Triad in the Buddhist temple of Yakushiji. Besides various motifs such as a grape-patterned arabesque and exotic figures, the principal statue's layered pedestal is decorated with carvings of the Four Guardians figures (one on each side), completed in 697. Based on their similar characteristics and design, the Dark Warrior carving of Yakushi Triad was presumably made approximately at the same time as the Takamatsuzuka tomb's turtle-snake fresco. (Lázár 2018)

The next Asuka period artwork to explore is the *Tenjukoku Shūchō* ('Embroidery of the Long Life in Heaven' 天寿国繡帳).³¹ It is an embroidered curtain mandala representing Buddhist heaven and eternal life, which Prince Shotoku was believed to have attained at the time of his death (622). The present-day tapestry, measuring 90 centimeters, was created in the first half of the 19th century and is a composite of a fragment of the Asuka period original (made by court ladies in the early 7th century) and a supplemental fragment dating to the Kamakura period (1275). (Pradel 1996)



Figure 13: A turtle motif of Tenjukoku Shūchō³²

The preserved fragments of Japan's oldest embroidered tapestry are full of references to Chinese Daoist symbols such as turtles. (Ooms 2009) Among the extant pieces with purple and

³¹ Property of Chūgūji temple (Nara prefecture). Fragments are housed in the Nara National Museum, the Tokyo National Museum, Horyūji temple and Shōsōin (treasure house of Tōdaiji temple).

³² Owned by the author, this postcard is depicting a well-known turtle motif of the mandala and is from the Nara National Museum, Nara, Japan. It was bought at the special exhibition 'Ito no mihotoke' (糸のみほとけ展) of Nara National Museum in 2018.

white ground colors, there are 4 turtle motifs, and there is another complete turtle shell, and five small shell fragments. Interestingly enough, the brighter turtle patterns are from the Asuka period. All shells carry an inscription (four characters on each), and there are twenty-five extant characters in total. Records from Shōsōin show that originally, there were 100 turtles with 400 Classical Chinese characters. Turtle patterns contain either characters of important names (representing Shōtoku's genealogy) or characters recorded in the *Jōgū Shōtoku Hōō Teisetsu* (上宮聖徳法王帝説)³³ – such as the death dates of Shōtoku and his mother, and the story of how the mandala was created. (Pradel 1996) The outlines of the turtle motifs and the stitches inside the motifs represent the characteristics of Asuka period embroidery influenced by Chinese and Korean textile art. For instance, contiguous rows of overlapping stem stitch (flat satin stitch) were used on the original turtle shells. (Pradel 1996) It is known from the inscription that designer artists and the supervisors were descendants of influential immigrant clans, such as the Koma³⁴, Aya³⁵ or Hata³⁶ clans.³⁷ Based on relevant ancient manuscripts, Japanese scholars have proposed a variety of theories regarding the proper arrangement of the turtle motifs in the original embroidered tapestry. Some suggest that the turtles were at the bottom part of the artwork while others believe the animal patterns were placed around the borders. According to Ōhashi, the turtles were probably placed among the other scattered motifs, being elements of the whole composition, and having the function of carrying the inscription. (Ōhashi 1995)

All turtle motifs in the Tenjukoku Shūchō are partially similar to some enigmatic stone artifacts of a turtle design (亀形石造物) in present-day Asuka village. For instance, 'Turtle Stone' (亀石)³⁸ is a sculpted rock carved in the shape of a smiling turtle facing southwest. It certainly looks like a turtle from one angle and its exterior bears lattice-shaped cuts like those on a mysterious basalt boulder on top of a steep hill in Asuka village called 'Masuda's Stone Boat' (益田岩船). Some people believe it was a marker between village or temple boundaries,

³³ *Jōgū Shōtoku Hōō Teisetsu* is an old text presumably completed in the second half of the Heian period. It is a biography of Prince Shōtoku. The oldest section of the text was written sometime before 708.

³⁴ This clan (高麗氏) was an immigrant royal family descended from a Goguryeo prince.

³⁵ People of Aya clan (漢氏) were descendants of Chinese (of Han dynasty) who had earlier settled in the Korean peninsula, and later immigrated to Japan and settled in the Hinokuma district. (Carter 1983)

³⁶ The Hata (秦 'loom') clan were associated in early history with weaving and metallurgy. Ancestors of Hata people came from the continent during the Kofun period through the Kingdom of Baekje. (Carter 1983)

³⁷ In the 7th century, several artist families of noble origins fled the Korean peninsula and settled in the Japanese capital of the Asuka period, taking up office. Painters of noble Goguryeo origins (e.g. the Koma clan) and artisans from the Hata clan are mentioned in *Nihon Shoki* as well. (Donohashi 2013)

³⁸ Interestingly enough, Neil Gordon Munro (1863-1942, a Scottish physician) called it 'Frog stone' in one of his photographs, taken in Asuka, Nara Prefecture, circa 1905 (in the collection of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford). (Grover 2017)

or it might have some kind of religious or memorial purpose (e.g. protecting temples, being a stone memorial), but scholars are not sure about what it was used for.³⁹

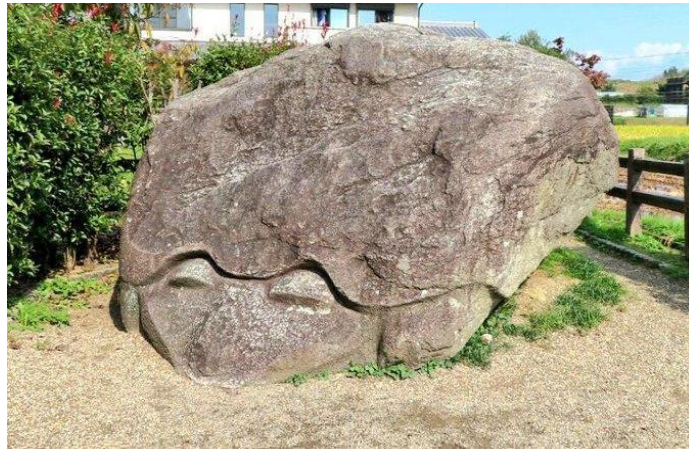


Figure 14: “Turtle Stone” of Asuka⁴⁰

Another noteworthy turtle-shaped stone artwork in Asuka is a peculiar looking water tank, a part of the Sakafune-ishi Ruins (酒船石遺跡). The site was mentioned in an entry for 656 in the *Nihon Shoki*. During the excavation work in 1992 and 2000, a turtle-shaped pure granite⁴¹ water tank (measuring 2.4 meters in length and 2 meters in width), stone paving, stone walls and stone steps were discovered around an oval stone structure. Very similar to the turtle motifs of Tenjukoku Shūchō, the design of the tank suggests that it was carved to form the shape of head, shell, tail and legs of a Chinese softshell turtle. The part of the carapace (measuring 1.25 meter in diameter and 20 cm in depth) was hollowed out to form a ‘basin’. The artwork has a realistic design, the turtle has well proportioned body and four long toes on its legs.⁴² The turtle-shaped carving are situated at the true north of the famous giant granite slab ‘Sakafune’, which placement could suggest a Daoist influence (water element – north direction – Dark Warrior deity) or the influence of Chinese geomancy, but the relationship between these two artworks and their origins remains unknown. The complete stonework was engineered to carry (sacred?) spring water which drained from an upper oval stone, passing through the stone turtle's nose and collecting in the turtle's back tank (shell section).

³⁹ In Nara prefecture, there is a legend that if the sculpted stone ever faces west, Japan will be flooded.

⁴⁰ Photograph was taken by the author in Asuka village, Nara, Japan. (2012)

⁴¹ Pure granite rock is one of the hardest stones to work.

⁴² Most turtles and tortoises have five toes. Nevertheless, it is still a realistic depiction of a turtle.



Figure 15: Turtle-shaped tank of Sakafune-ishi Ruins⁴³

The water would flow out of the tail. Scholars believe that these are the remains of a structure that Empress Saimei (r. 655-661) used for fertility rites and purifying water rituals, while others argue that it may have been the structure related to Futatsuki Palace of Empress Saimei. Based on archeological evidence, it was in use until the Heian period for approximately 250 years. (Kawakami 2003, Senda 2000: 155–157., Wada 2000)

There is a similar looking stone structure inside Shitennōji temple – or as many native Kansai people like to describe it, the “Turtle Temple” - in Osaka. Being just a few meters away from a large man-made pond filled with hundreds of turtles, there are two stoneworks in Kameidō Hall facing each other; one is a turtle-shaped stone tank (2.15 meters long and 1.52 meters wide) and the other one is a realistic stone turtle (1.22 meters long and 1.54 meters wide), both carved from single pieces of Tatsuyama stone (竜山石)⁴⁴. The structure – which is about 1.5 meters below ground level - was presumably built around the same time period and is similar in scale as the stonework at the Sakafuneishi ruins in Asuka. The stone turtle’s back and head were clearly made in later years than the tank. It was engineered to carry water which drained from the oval stone, passing through the turtle’s nose and collecting in the turtle’s back tank. Supposedly, it was created for use in state rituals (water ceremonies). The first academic studies were conducted by a number of scholars of Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property (元興寺文化財研究所) in 2019.⁴⁵

⁴³ Photograph was taken by the author in Asuka village, Nara, Japan. (2012)

⁴⁴ Tatsuyama mountain in Hyogo prefecture is the location of an ancient stone quarry. Tatsuyama stone (a variety of tuff) was widely used for stone coffins and other stonework during Kofun and Asuka periods.

⁴⁵ Mainichi Shinbun article by Yukiko Hayashi (April 26, 2019)

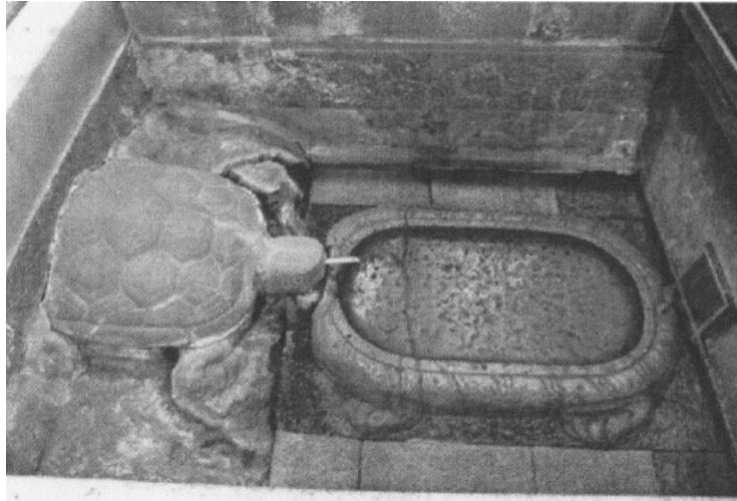


Figure 16: The stone structure of Shitennoji temple, Kameido Hall (四天王寺亀井堂)

Lastly, an interesting fact should be mentioned here. Turtle-supported funeral steles (亀趺) are stone slabs that originated as imperial tomb markers in Han China and bear information (glowing biographies).⁴⁶ Over time, these carved objects also appeared in Mongolia, the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam and Japan. Examples of stone turtles carrying a stele are found in Japan, but only – interestingly enough - from the end of the 12th century.⁴⁷ For instance, in Kamakura (Kanagawa prefecture), the tombs of Shimazu Tadahisa and Mori Suemitsu (founders of early medieval samurai clans) are separated by a well-preserved stele. Another famous example of a turtle-supported tablet was installed in the garden of Gesshōji temple in Matsue city (Shimane prefecture) as a tomb marker of feudal lord Matsudaira Munenobu. But why was this tradition neglected in ancient times? The design and the concept did not seem to have been particularly welcome at the imperial court – probably because the Japanese imperial court developed its unique tomb culture/funerary customs, based on local traditions. Even during (and after) the significant artistic, social, and political transformations of the Asuka period, nobles from the court remained selective in considering the artistic and religious ideas that they wanted to adopt from China (or Korea) and presumably they chose not to incorporate tomb marker steles for imperial tombs.

Conclusions

⁴⁶ This picture is a scanned image from a research report copy that was shared publicly at an official „report meeting” (亀形石造物調査報告会) on June 1, 2019 at Shitennoji temple. The event was organized by a number of scholars of Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property and Shitennoji temple.

⁴⁷ One notable, well-preserved example of a turtle-supported tablet was installed in the garden of Gesshōji temple in Matsue city (Shimane prefecture) as a tomb marker of Matsudaira Munenobu (r. 1731-1767).

The present paper analyzed prehistoric and ancient Japanese depictions of turtles from the middle Jōmon period to the end of the Asuka period. Jōmon and (most) Yayoi period depictions were very simple and spiritual, more symbolic than realistic. As Japanese culture developed and was eventually influenced by many foreign traditions and beliefs, Japanese art transformed and the iconography and symbolic meaning of the turtles developed as well.

In ancient Chinese tradition, the deity 'Dark Warrior' (depicted as intertwined figures of a nearly realistic turtle and snake) represented seven constellations in the northern quarter of heaven and was believed to be the guardian deity of the north. The depiction of this supernatural being became quite important in Korea (mostly Goguryeo) and Japan as well. Colorful tomb murals and carvings of the Dark Warrior figure, as well as turtle-shaped stone structures, gilt bronze horse trappings and crafts are remarkable examples of how Japan greatly absorbed and modified the artistic knowledge, philosophies and cosmology of ancient Chinese and Korean culture.

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