

Joshua Frydman. *Inscribed Objects and the Development of Literature in Early Japan*.  
Leiden: Brill, 2023.

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## Joshua Frydman. *Inscribed Objects and the Development of Literature in Early Japan*. Leiden: Brill, 2023.

BOOK REVIEW BY YOKO HSUEH SHIRAI

Joshua Frydman's latest book is a complex, multi-faceted study of poems (*uta* 歌 and *waka* 和歌) inscribed on objects, primarily *mokkan* 木簡, a modern term (p. 13) indicating wooden slips or tablets inscribed with black ink and unearthed in Japan from sites dating between the seventh and tenth centuries (p. 51).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to manuscript texts written on paper, *mokkan* functioned as temporary records: the inscribed surface could be scraped or peeled off (p. 23) and reused until their eventual disposal. The core of the book comprises Frydman's examination of poems written on *mokkan* that may or may not appear in the "earliest anthology of poetry in Japanese, the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of Myriad Ages, c. 780)" (p. 14).

At first glance, the book seems to address specialists of literary studies. However, this is not the case, and I learned much from this fascinating, if at times challenging, book. Frydman seeks to engage "too-often separated disciplines" of "history, literary studies, and archaeology" in an attempt to "propose an integrated understanding of Japan's early literary development"

(p. 15). This study thus dissolves traditional academic boundaries: readers interested in the history of sixth- to twelfth-century Japan, especially court culture in the capital cities, might browse the introduction and chapter 1; for those interested in the history of literacy and writing in Asia, see chapter 4; on pages 5 to 12 a concise, accessible history of Japan, relying on the archaeological record between the third and ninth centuries, might appeal to undergraduate readers. At the same time, this book is for literature specialists. Frydman follows in the footsteps of David Lurie's path-breaking scholarship in this field, and quotes frequently from Lurie in chapter 1.<sup>2</sup>

Starting with chapter 1, "Scripts and Surfaces," the author introduces manuscripts and *mokkan*.<sup>3</sup> Before archaeologists unearthed *mokkan* in 1961, scholars primarily relied on manuscripts: the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters, 712), *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, 720), *Kaifūsō* 懷風藻 (Poetic Gems Cherishing the Styles of Old, 751), *Man'yōshū*, and *Shoku nihongi* 続日本紀 (Continued Chronicles of Japan, 797) (p. 16). Literary Sinitic, the prestige language

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1 These wooden fragments survived under waterlogged, anaerobic conditions (p. 36). By 1980, the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Nara Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 奈良文化財研究所, hereafter Nabunken 奈文研) was a center of *mokkan* research (p. 20). See pp. 24-30 for *mokkan* categories; see pp. 30-40 for a list of transcription symbols.

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2 Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*.

3 See pp. 19-40 for a historiography of *mokkan* scholarship. Frydman lists selected inscriptions found on clay, ceramic, stone, metal, and lacquer objects (pp. 40-45).

across East Asia during the first millennium CE, was written on “most *mokkan*” but to “represent spoken Japanese ... techniques were employed for phonetic representation using subsets of Chinese characters for their sounds only, independent of their meanings. These techniques, known collectively as *man'yōgana* 万葉仮名 ... allowed writers to transcribe the spoken vernacular by spelling it out syllable by syllable” (pp. 23–24).<sup>4</sup> This technique appears in the *Man'yōshū*, but was not exclusive to this text (p. 54). There were “multiple sets of *man'yōgana*” (p. 24) in use, reflecting a lack of standardization and the experimental nature of the period when transitioning from a nonliterate to literate society.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 2, “Disposing of Words,” explores *mokkan* inscribed with poems. Some may have served as visual aids when reciting poems during oral performances, similar to a teleprompter today. This interpretation traces back to a landmark study in 2010 by Sakaehara Towao who established a typology after analyzing all thirty-nine *uta mokkan* known to scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 3, “The Practice of Writing,” focuses on what is referred to as the Naniwazu Poem (named after the first four syllables of the poem).<sup>7</sup> Table 3.1 (pp. 112–19) lists nineteen objects inscribed with at least two phonetic characters from the poem; in total, “[a]s of 2014, twenty-two *mokkan* bearing fragments of the Naniwazu Poem have been uncovered [in addition to] eleven pottery shards, two roof tiles, and three inscriptions on the inner ceilings of pagodas” (p. 111) for a total of thirty-eight inscriptions on objects.<sup>8</sup> Despite a late seventh-century manufacture date for some of these

objects, for reasons unknown (but explored by the author), the Naniwazu Poem was left out of the *Man'yōshū*;<sup>9</sup> the earliest surviving paper document that mentions this poem is the “tenth-century *Kokin wakashū* [古今和歌集] ... [and along with] other sources from the Heian Period, [these sources] link the poem with children’s education—described as ‘writing practice,’ albeit using the premodern term *tenarai* 手習い” (p. 91).

Before the tenth century, however, Frydman does not believe the Naniwazu Poem served as “writing practice.” Because characters from the poem were written on objects that were not easy to see (like roof tiles or ceilings) or were not meant to be saved (*mokkan*), he proposes the act of inscription itself functioned like a “magic spell” to “summon forth the same force or meaning that could otherwise be channeled through reading or performing the entire poem in other contexts” (p. 105). The author persuasively argues his thesis. Starting with Lurie’s translation:

In Naniwa port / they bloom, these flowers! / Proclaiming  
it is now spring, / from within winter’s tolls, / they bloom,  
these flowers!<sup>10</sup>

Naniwa, situated in Osaka near the bay, was “the main port under official state control through the end of the Heian Period” (p. 106). Extensive archaeological campaigns at the Naniwa site between the late 1960s and 1980s confirmed two distinct layers of palace ruins. The earlier ruins are “believed to be the remains of Kōtoku’s [孝徳 (596–654, r. 645–654)] palace from the 640s, whereas the later, upper ruins ... are believed to be Shōmu’s [聖武 (701–756, r. 724–749)] reconstruction” (p. 137). Kōtoku “tried to make Naniwa the center of the realm” (p. 135) after moving the capital out of Asuka following the “coup of 645” (p. 136).<sup>11</sup> Kōtoku’s reign

4 The method behind *man'yōgana* was “originally believed to be a Japanese invention” but today the “most widely accepted hypothesis for the origins of purely phonetic uses of Chinese characters is as a translation technique for Sanskrit.” That is, the introduction of Buddhism to China “before the third century CE brought with it the need to represent ... names and terms [in Sanskrit] with no direct Chinese equivalent, and one solution was to transliterate these words using Chinese characters for their phonetic readings alone” (p. 54).

5 According to Frydman, “The Japanese court of the Asuka and Nara Periods featured as much if not more experimentation and interaction with continental people, norms, and modes than it did in the tenth century” (p. 170).

6 For details, see pp. 50–53, and Sakaehara, *Man'yō uta mokkan*. Table 2.1 (pp. 60–65) lists *uta mokkan* featuring their size, type, date, excavation site, and inscription.

7 See p. 106 for a transcription and translation.

8 Inscriptions found in Buddhist temples include roof tiles at Chūgūji 中宮寺 (pp. 83–85; pp. 118–19; p. 128) and Yamadadera 山田寺 (pp. 118–19; pp. 128–30), and the pagoda ceilings at Hōryūji 法隆寺 (pp. 118–19; pp. 130–33).

9 Discovery of matching poems in *mokkan* and *Man'yōshū* is rare. A first exception: most of the first two lines from Poem 2205 in *Man'yōshū* Book 10 were identified in the Akihagino *Mokkan*, “one of only four objects yet discovered that bear a poem fragment linkable to a poem in the *Man'yōshū* .... Like all poems in Book 10 of the *Man'yōshū*, this poem is anonymous and undated” (p. 75). A second exception: the Asakayama *Mokkan* dated to the early 740s that features two poems, the Naniwazu Poem on one side (a-side) and the Asakayama Poem on the other side (b-side) (pp. 202–10). The “Asakayama Poem appears as Poem 3807 in Book 16 of the *Man'yōshū*, although as a variant with a different final two lines” (pp. 109–10).

10 Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*, p. 261, as quoted in Frydman, p. 106.

ushered in new practices and a new political order, yet his achievements were minimized by his successors who presided over the compilation of *Nihon shoki* (p. 138) and instead, becomes “second to the [crown] prince [Naka no Ōe 中大兄] ... the future Tenji [天智 (626–672, r. 668–671/672)]” (p. 139). Frydman speculates that “the Naniwazu Poem may be a vestige of cultural memory of Kōtoku’s court” (p. 139), a memory that was almost erased from the official annals. Regarding the intended meaning of the Naniwazu Poem, its “importance may derive from reference to a [fresh,] new court emerging at Naniwa [after 645], like flowers of spring, holding new promise of glory on a continental model” (p. 139). Why then inscribe this poem onto objects? According to Frydman:

Artifacts inscribed with the Naniwazu Poem can therefore be posited as ritualistic objects that project this recollection [of Kōtoku’s court] and support of royal power by and within the court and bureaucracy. Even objects whose text is not primarily for human-to-human communication [in other words, for deities] would still maintain this ritualistic power to draw upon and celebrate the force that gives stability to the system—a strong and prosperous reign at its center. (p. 144)

That is, someone inscribing this poem perhaps attempted to summon the newly emerging power associated with the royal palace and port at Naniwa. Frydman’s compelling thesis warrants serious consideration, and for this reviewer, this is the most interesting contribution made by the author.

Chapter 4, “Language Patterns,” examines relationships between the written “prestige language” and the spoken “vernacular language,” and turns to Latin and Sanskrit for comparative paradigms. In China, Literary Sinitic was used for official government documents and religious texts, distinct from the Middle Chinese spoken by the Tang court (p. 148). After the middle of the seventh century, Literary Sinitic was used for official documents in Japan. As for the spoken language, Frydman convincingly observes that “the existence in Japan of powerful families who were also recent immigrants to the archipelago introduces enough uncertainty that we cannot claim that Old Japanese was the sole first language of seventh- and eighth-century nobility” (p. 147). The Japanese court was composed of a “multilingual society [whose members were not] bound by a single language” (p. 148).

Chapter 5, “Composing the Canon,” investigates how the *Man’yōshū* was compiled.<sup>12</sup> Much remains unknown, because the *Man’yōshū* lacks a preface, and “although the last dated poem is from 759, the absence of any references to the anthology prior to 790, in *Kakyō hyōshiki* [歌經標式], means that contemporaneous sources ... offer no easy answers” (p. 191). Concerning an explanation in a *Kokin wakashū* preface that the *Man’yōshū* originated under “imperial command,” Frydman suggests this retroactive appropriation confers “on native poetry the same kind of long, imperially supported history that is claimed from Literary Sinitic poetry” (pp. 188–90) and is not reliable.

Next, the author turns to *mokkan* with a connection to those featured in the *Man’yōshū*. These are the above-mentioned Akihagino and Asakayama Mokkan (see n. 9), and the Asanagini Mokkan (pp. 199–213). The Asanagini Mokkan “was found at the Ishigami Ruins [*Ishigami iseki* 石神遺跡] in Asuka [and] dates from before 690, between 50 and 100 years prior to the compilation of the *Man’yōshū*. This demonstrates that phrases equivalent to the first three lines of Poem 1391 [in Book 7 of the *Man’yōshū*, anonymous and undated (pp. 200–201)] were in circulation long before the poem we know today was anthologized” (p. 202). In short, poems first inscribed on *mokkan* may have been recited over several decades before being copied down in the *Man’yōshū*.

Chapter 6, “Looking Back and Writing Forward,” examines the twenty-first century by evaluating new technology (electronic or digital media) used for communication. Frydman’s massive jump in time and context was puzzling to this reviewer—with the exception of “standardization.” Before the Heian period, various Chinese characters were used interchangeably to transcribe speech, and a uniform standard only developed over a long period of time. Specifically, “standardization of forms appears to be about settling on the most efficient methods for particular functions” (p. 221), which divide into two main categories: first, official government records, and second, “artistic pursuits,” including poetic composition. For the first category,

<sup>11</sup> For further details, see Takinami, *Jitō tennō*, pp. 3–42.

<sup>12</sup> Frydman follows the “standard view” established by “Itō Haku’s 伊藤博 (1925–2003) work in the 1960s and 1970s” that the *Man’yōshū* consists of “not just two but several compilations” during “the mid- to late eighth century.” Itō, *Man’yōshū no kōzō* I, p. 208 (as mentioned in Frydman, p. 192, n. 19).

Frydman cites Inui Yoshihiko's thesis that it was more time efficient and easier for bureaucrats to use a single-syllable character for its sound, instead of "a mixture of characters where some represented two or more syllables and others did not" (p. 222).<sup>13</sup> In the second category, leisure-oriented "artistic pursuits may involve selection [of characters] in the opposite direction, choosing complexity even when not as efficient, particularly when the choice serves aesthetic ends" (p. 222). This "complexity" applies to "the *Man'yōshū*'s more complex usage of both semantic and phonetic representation to create different aesthetic effects" (p. 222).

After reading the book, three sets of questions came to mind. First, used *mokkan* were discovered "from disposal sites: ditches, dumping grounds ... and latrines" (p. 25), but how did one get their hands on new *mokkan*? While Frydman mentions that *mokkan* were discarded, the book does not discuss how they were made. Was there a designated scrap wood pile from the ongoing construction projects in the capital, with each person having to make their own *mokkan*? Or was there a *mokkan* distribution center supplying *mokkan* to bureaucrats? Were *mokkan* bundles perhaps sold at the public marketplace? Easy access to *mokkan* might help answer Frydman's question about whether "women did or did not create, use or distribute *mokkan*" (p. 58, n. 36).

Second, the national Nabunken is the foremost institution for *mokkan* scholarship, yet Nabunken is not the only archaeological institution in the region. For instance, both Nara Prefecture and the city of Nara actively excavate sites within their respective territories. Because the bibliography does not feature publications by the Nara Prefectural Kashihara Archaeological Research Institute (Nara Kenritsu Kashihara Kōkōgaku Kenkyūjo 奈良県立橿原考古学研究所, hereafter Kashikōken), and the author lists just one visit to Kashikōken (p. 84, n. 83), this reviewer wonders if Frydman could have missed a relevant object, aside from *mokkan*, housed at a regional institution.<sup>14</sup>

Third, over "200,000" *mokkan* have been unearthed in Japan (p. 19), but the "number of poetry inscriptions from early Japan remains relatively small, about forty in all" (p. 56). And half of the total *mokkan* were excavated just southeast of Heijō 平城 Palace, from ancient gutters

surrounding the former residence of Prince Nagaya 長屋 (684–729), then appropriated by Queen consort Kōmyō 光明 (701–760) soon after Nagaya's death (pp. 95–96). Because the number of poems inscribed on objects is inordinately miniscule compared to the total object count, does this impact the author's study in any way? Does the number of recovered poems reflect a significant loss, or demonstrate the extreme rarity of inscribing poems on materials like wood? An answer might not exist, but fascinates this reviewer nonetheless.

*Inscribed Objects* addresses the impact of the introduction and assimilation of writing in early Japan, an environment that was fluid, chaotic, and confusing. Frydman ambitiously pushes into this largely uncharted territory with his exploration of poems written on disposable objects, and a boundless curiosity into how things work—like his step-by-step instructions on how to make the "*sumi* 墨, bone-glue ink" (pp. 22–23) used to inscribe *mokkan*. Ultimately, there is much more to discover in the book, inviting further discussion by readers with other specializations and interests.

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<sup>13</sup> Inui, "Uta hyōki to kana shiyō," p. 243 (as mentioned in Frydman, p. 222, n. 20).

<sup>14</sup> On a related note, a minor typo on p. 129, n. 68 warrants correction: Frydman writes "Asuka Historical Museum 飛鳥史料館 in Kashihara." The correct character is 資, or 飛鳥資料館. More critically, this museum is located in *Asuka* and administered by Nabunken. There is another museum affiliated with Kashikōken, the Nara Kenritsu Kashihara Kōkōgaku Kenkyūjo Fuzoku Hakubutsukan 奈良県立橿原考古学研究所附属博物館, located about 4 km away in *Kashihara*. Both are important museums that are highly recommended.