

Asuka-Period Roof Tiles

Close examination of the clay tiles covering the roofs of the **Zenshitsu** and **Gokurakudō** will reveal that some tiles are older than others. In fact, some of them are the oldest roof tiles in Japan. The oldest clay tiles were crafted over 1,400 years ago by artisans from the Korean kingdom of Baekje. These tiles originally adorned the roof of Hōkōji Temple, the precursor to Gangōji, which was built about 20 kilometers to the south in the old capital of Asuka. In 718, Hōkōji's dormitory was dismantled and relocated to Nara to become Gangōji, and the tiles were also brought and reused. Over 1,200 years later, the temple underwent extensive renovations, and many of the tiles were found to be in usable condition. They are still in use today.

A second, slightly newer set of tiles was made for the construction of Gangōji. Instead of being brought from Asuka, these tiles were made on-site in Nara, and they were evidently made in a hurry. Unlike the oldest tiles, which were carefully sanded down to create a smooth finish, the eighth-century Nara tiles did not receive this extra treatment, and they are quite rough.

Tiles from these first two sets can be distinguished from newer tiles by their design and coloration. Newer sections of the roofs are tiled in *hongawara*, which are flanged to slot together, creating a smooth joint. Tiles made at Asuka and just after the move to Nara do not have this flange, and this creates a visible overlap where the tiles meet. The original tiles made for Hōkōji are reddish, but the more recently made tiles are a uniform gray.

The visual differences of the various tiles are especially apparent when comparing the south and west sides of the Gokurakudō roof. When viewed from the west side of the **Futoden**, there is also strong contrast between the rightmost and central sections of the Zenshitsu roof.