

Wooden Shipping Tags from Wakasa and Tsuruga

Overview

Wakasa Province used to pay certain taxes and tributes to the emperor's court in the form of food. Wooden tablets called *mokkan* that served as shipping tags for such payments in the eighth century have been excavated from the ancient capitals of Fujiwarakyo and Heijokyo in present-day Nara Prefecture. Inscriptions on the tablets showed the district of origin, the relevant tax or tribute, and the type of food the shipment contained. Payments sent from Wakasa included large amounts of salt and various seafood such as sea bream, mussels, and sea urchin.

Learn More

Evidence of Food Supplies to the Court

Mokkan tablets from the Wakasa region were uncovered during excavations of Fujiwarakyo (the capital in 694–710) and Heijokyo (the capital in 710–740 and in 745–784). This suggests that Wakasa Province was a *miketsukuni*, a region designated as a provider of food for the emperor and the court. Other *miketsukuni* were Awaji Province (Awaji Island in present-day Hyogo Prefecture), Ise Province, and Shima Province (both in present-day Mie Prefecture).

Physical Characteristics and Information on the Mokkan Tablets

The oldest of the discovered *mokkan* dates to 687. The tablets were typically made of *hinoki* cypress or Japanese cedar and ranged from about 8 to 24 cm in length. The writing on them reveals information such as which district the shipment came from, what tax payment it was related to, who the payer was, and what type of food it contained.

Recorded Forms of Tax Payments

Many of the tags marked salt shipments used to pay *cho*, a type of individual tax levied on people of the commoner class with adjustments according to age and working ability. At that time, various taxes were paid with foodstuffs such as rice and soybeans rather than money. However, *cho* had to be paid in goods other than rice, such as raw silk or timber. Since Wakasa Province was an important salt producer, the primary form of *cho* tax payments for its citizens was salt.

Other food products listed on *mokkan* for shipment to the capital include Japanese pilchard, sea bream, mussels, sea urchin, abalone, sea squirt, squid, sea cucumbers, and seaweed.

Exhibition Items

Replicas of wooden shipping tags excavated at the sites of the old capitals are suspended in large glass cases, and both the front and the back of each tablet are easily visible. The touchscreen Mokkan Navi located next to the cases is a digital database of several dozen *mokkan* that is searchable by three categories: era, shipment origin, and contents. Each page displays a high-resolution image of a tablet with the old Japanese text, which is accompanied by a modern Japanese translation and illustrations of the shipment contents.