

Shirasaki Man'yo Park

The limestone formations of the Shirasaki Coast are celebrated in verse at Shirasaki Man'yo Park. The outcrops have inspired poets since at least the eighth century and are mentioned in the *Man'yoshu*, the oldest extant collection of Japanese poetry.

Two stone monuments in the park are inscribed with *waka* poems. They face the waters of the Kii Strait and the limestone outcrops that jut out of the sea and along the headland. The monument nearest the parking lot has a bronze plaque with a poem composed in 701. The *waka* is an ode to the beauty of the limestone landscape and reflects the unknown poet's yearning to witness the breathtaking coastal scene once more. It is one of 13 composed during a visit by Emperor Monmu (r. 697–707) to Kiinokuni (present-day Wakayama Prefecture). The emperor would have traveled with a large entourage, and the words of the poem make it clear that the party passed the limestone headland by boat.

The other monument bears a verse by contemporary poet Okano Hirohiko (b. 1924). It describes a peaceful scene of the limestone formations bathed in the first rays of dawn.

Waka is a classical Japanese poem with a 5-7-5-7-7 meter. The style is described in the preface to a tenth-century anthology as having “the human heart as its seed and myriads of words as its leaves.” The *Man'yoshu* contains approximately 4,500 *waka* poems in 20 volumes. Many of the poems describe sentiments evoked by the natural world, the changing seasons, and life events such as love and loss.