

Shichishitō Sword

This seven-branched sword has been housed at Isonokami Jingū Shrine for over a millennium. Until the 1870s, it was simply thought to be a rare and unusual halberd. The weapon's true significance was not discovered until the inquisitive chief priest Masatomo Kan (1824–1897) brushed aside its layers of rust and made a history-changing discovery: an inscription inlaid in gold.

The writing, which stretches across both sides of the blade, is corroded and partially unreadable. Scholars have worked for over a century to decipher the inscription, and there are several interpretations. However, the message seems to indicate the sword was given as a gift from the king of Baekje (18 BCE–660 CE), a kingdom of what is now the Korean Peninsula.

An eighth-century chronicle of Japan records the gift of a “seven-branched sword” in the fifty-second year of Empress Jingū's reign. If that sword is the

Shichishitō sword kept at Isonokami Jingū, then it dates to sometime in the latter half of the fourth century. However, the exact meaning of the inlaid characters is still uncertain, and different interpretations suggest different relationships between the countries of Baekje and Japan.

Another mystery is the sword's distinctive shape and thickness, just a few millimeters at its thinnest point. For these reasons, the Shichishitō sword is a highly significant historical artifact and a National Treasure. Given its age and fragility, it is rarely removed from climate-controlled storage.