

## The Hata family in ancient Harima: an engraved stone tablet

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### Ancient history and the recent discovery of historical sources

Everybody who participates in historical research gets excited about new discoveries of documents, but such good fortune seldom happens in the case of early history such as that of the ancient and medieval periods. Thanks to archaeology there have been considerably increased opportunities for digging up *mokkan* (wooden tags) and ink-inscribed earthenware, but even so, the new discovery of ancient historical records is a rare occurrence.

A precious example of this is an engraved stone tablet called ‘Hata no Masuhito Kokusho Ishi’ [‘Hata no Masuhito’s Engraved Stone’], held by the Ogori Culture Museum in Yamaguchi-shi, Yamaguchi Prefecture. I first came across this stone in 2006 as a member of a research team led by Wataru SAKAE and funded by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research.<sup>1</sup> We were indebted to information received from archaeologist Toshihiko YOSHINORI of Tatsuno-shi Board of Education, who said that at Ogura Culture Museum he had seen a stone artefact engraved with the words ‘Harima Province’ that appeared to be from the ancient period. I immediately headed for Ogura and searched it out.

### The newly discovered artefact

The artefact is a worked stone in the shape of a pointed *shōgi* piece, 23.0 cm long, 15.9 cm wide, approximately 3 cm thick, and weighing 2.7 kg. (see Figures 1 and 2). A hole is drilled through near the top, and towards the left on the obverse side is written ‘Stone of Hata no Masuhito, Idate *Sato*, Shikama *Kōri*’, in two lines of largish Chinese characters (graphs). Assuming this facet to be the obverse, then words are also engraved on the reverse in smaller, shallower graphs: ‘This stone is the ... [磨?][?] stone.’ (The ellipsis denotes that the number of graphs engraved there is indecipherable; the [?] indicates that there is clearly a graph, but it is illegible; [磨?] indicates that this is probably the graph in question here, but that this is uncertain.) No date is engraved, but Idate *Sato*, Shikama *Kōri*, was an administrative district under the *gungōsei* (system of *kōri* and *sato* local government districts) used from Tenpyō 12 (740 AD). This system continued even after the start of the Heian Period, but it has much in common with the style of writing for place names in the early Nara Period. The last graph on the reverse, 在, may be read *nari*, for which such a reading has been confirmed in the late Asuka Period, so it is an attested ancient reading. Although the *gungyōsei* is referred to, the stone is judged to have been crafted in the mid-Nara Period, on the basis of the style and usage of the graphs. Among the graphs on the obverse, the first one for Shikama and the *sato* character in ‘Idate *Sato*’ are engraved in non-standard forms (*itaiji*), but there are other examples of both in ancient times. Overall, it is clear that this stone belonged to somebody called Masuhito whose home was in Idate *Sato*, Shikama *Kōri*, Harima Province, in the mid-Nara Period. Through collaboration between the relevant museums, we were able to solve the question of how this stone tablet came to be in the collection of a museum in Yamaguchi.

### The stone’s provenance and discovery, and its ‘rediscovery’

This stone was not discovered through archeological excavation, but was found by chance. Apparently it was unearthed from about 30–40 cm depth of soil while planting a fruit orchard in the district of what is now Ogōri Kamigō, Yamaguchi-shi, in 1963–64 (see Figure 3). From then it was kept at home in the garden of the person who found it, but from 1974–75 it was held and exhibited by a local researcher in the facility that was the predecessor of the Ogōri Culture Museum. There were some researchers who regarded it as an ancient stone artefact, but that view was not publicised, and not even the compilers of the local body history mentioned it. Forty years elapsed after finding this stone before its ‘rediscovery’ and its seeing the light of day

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: commonly referred to as *Kakenhi*.

as an inscribed artefact dating from the Nara Period. Various theories have been proposed as to what this stone was for, such as a 'weight' (for scales), a *kairo* (stone for hand-warming), etc.

The place where it was found was in the vicinity of what used to be called Yoshiki-gun in Suō Province until the Edo Period. It was located on a river terrace near where the Fushino River that flows through Yamaguchi-shi drains into the Inland Sea. It was right next to the site of the residence of the *ōjōya* (administrator of a group of villages) Yūzō HAYASHI, who was a well-known sympathiser of the Emperor at the end of the Edo Period. It is said that there was a row of the Hayashi family's rice warehouses along here. Since the stone turned up on land associated with a man of renown in the Bakumatsu and Meiji Periods at a time when interest in the ancient period was increasing, and on account of there being no other records of Hata no Masuhito, and on account of the fact that it was unlikely to have attracted the attention of anybody in the Early Modern or Modern Periods, it was thought that it was probably a fake.

### **The significance of the finding of the stone artefact**

So saying, why would a stone artefact that allegedly belonged to someone from Harima Province have been found so far away in Suō Province? This can perhaps be understood if we consider the nature of the region where it was found. Until the Edo Period this district was a node for the transport of goods, linking the Inland Sea with the interior along the Fushino River. In this respect it was the same in ancient times. Kamigō village was a part of Fushino Manor, which was well-known as a *shōen* (estate) belonging to Tōdaiji Temple. Fushino Manor was established early on, between 749 and 757, which just so happens to be when the statue of Vairocana Buddha (the so-called Great Buddha) was being made at Tōdaiji. The copper ore used in its casting was sourced from Naganobori Copper Mine in Nagato Province, and it is thought that Fushino Manor was used as the port at which the copper was loaded. So the place where the stone was found was once an important point for the distribution of commodities in support of that project of the ancient Japanese state.

Actually, there were *fuko*<sup>2</sup> in Shikama *Kōri* in Harima Province, too, who paid taxes to Tōdaiji Temple, which confirms that there was some kind of relationship between Shikama and Tōdaiji. According to the entry for Idate *Sato* in *Harima Fudoki*, it says that this place was so called because when Okinaga Tarashihime no mikoto ['Queen-Consort Jingū'] went off to pacify Karakuni (on the Korean peninsula), she enshrined Idate no Kami here as her ship's guardian deity. This is assumed to be one of the legends associated with 'Queen-Consort Jingū's' punitive expeditions to the continent, but it means that this was a place where the tutelary deities who protected ocean crossings via the Inland Sea were enshrined. There is also the somewhat disturbing myth that when Ōnamuchi reached 'the hill of the deity Idate', he had had enough of his violent son and was going to leave him there; but Hoakari no mikoto noticed him stealthily putting his boat out, so he conjured up a gale and capsized his father's boat. From this we learn that Idate *Sato* was an important base for sea traffic on the Inland Sea. The fact that a possession of somebody from Shikama *Sato* was found in Suō Province is due to the connections to Tōdaiji, and also to the importance of Idate *Sato* itself.

There is another factor that should be taken into consideration: the Hata family. The Hata were descendants of people who had migrated from the Korean peninsula. It is well known that there were several members of the Hata family living in the west of Harima, especially in Shikama *Kōri*, and what distinguished them was their advanced level of construction engineering. The original base of the Hata was at Kadono *Kōri* in Yamashiro Province, where an irrigation canal called Kadono Ōi for drawing water from the Ōi River was constructed by them ('*Hata-shi Honkei Chō*' section in *Seiji Yōryaku*).<sup>3</sup> In Harima Province the Hata of Akō *Kōri* are recorded as having tackled the construction of a dam (*Harima no Kuni Sakoshi, Kanbe Ryōgō Ge*).

No doubt the reason that Hata no Masuhito of Shikama *Kōri* went to Suō was because of his advanced level of construction engineering for development of the land there. Judging by the fact that the inscription omits 'Harima Province' and records only that he was from Shikama *Kōri*, this strongly implies that there were other engineers around him in Suō who had also been brought in from Harima Province. Assuming that these people also played a significant role in the administrative headquarters at Tōdaiji Temple, it makes sense that such a stone tablet would turn

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: vassal households of which half the taxes levied were allocated to a specific person or courtier under the *ritsuryō* system of government.

<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: a document on state governance compiled around 1002 CE.

up in Suō. 'Hata no Masuhito's Engraved Stone' is an important resource for telling us about interregional exchange in the ancient period, that written historical documents alone do not.