



MOKKAN

noun (Japanese historiography)

wooden objects of
various size and shape with
notes written in India ink

Excavating



Reading

More than two hundred thousand mokkan have been found at the Nara Palace Site since the first piece was unearthed here in 1961. This accounts for about eighty percent of pre-twelfth-century mokkan found across Japan.



At the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, our team of researchers, excavators, and assistants work tirelessly to unearth, clean, analyze, record, and conserve each and every piece of mokkan we find.

Cleaning



Storing





While a few mokkan survive in their entirety, most are found as broken pieces. Some researchers say this was deliberate, to destroy sensitive information, while others say that they were reused for sanitary purposes. Many mokkan are found as discarded shavings resulting from the continuous recycling of valuable timber.



A single mokkan—whether whole or a shaving—rarely contains anything revelatory, but each fragment provides clues that can be collated, pieced together and compared with other documents. The sum of raw information gathered from thousands of texts, combined with other historical records, provides a remarkably detailed picture of the inner-workings of the state in the eighth century.

That is why each and every piece of mokkan is worth all the effort we put into documenting and conserving them and why the Japanese government designated three thousand one hundred eighty-four mokkan from the Nara Palace Site collectively as a single National Treasure in 2017.