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RESEARCH INSTITUTE

THE WOODEN TABLETS
FROM THE NARA PALACE SITE (I)

English Summary

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RESEARCH REPORT V

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WOODEN TABLETS EXCAVATED FROM THE NARA IMPERIAL PALACE SITE

The ancient metropolis of Nara, whose site lies under and adjacent to the present-day town of Nara, served as the capital of Japan from 710 to 784. Earlier, members of the ruling class, with the Emperor as their nucleus, had diligently worked for the establishment of a legally-regulated, centralized government, and during the second half of the seventh century, two capitals (the Naniwa Capital, located within the present city of Ōsaka, and the Fujiwara Capital, in the Asuka region of Nara Prefecture) had been inaugurated, both planned after Chinese prototypes. However, with the full implementation of the legal system and the firm establishment of the centralized state by the eighth century, a broad, impressive capital, in keeping with the greater dignity of the government, became a necessity, and the result was the Nara metropolis.

The great city was laid out across the northern part of the Nara plain. It measured four kilometers east to west and four and a half kilometers north to south, with an extensive addition on the eastern side, known as the “*Gekyō*” (the “Outer” or “Peripheral” Capital), which ran one and a half kilometers east to west and two kilometers north to south. The extensive Palace, which included the Imperial Domicile (“*Dairi*”) and Halls of State (“*Chōdōin*”), together with the highest government bureaus, was erected in the northern extremity of the main area, at the terminus of a central north-south avenue, and covered an area about one kilometer square. Bordering this area on the east is a section measuring a quarter of a kilometer east to west and three quarters of a kilometer north to south. These two areas were utilized by local farmers as irrigated rice fields until they were recently purchased by the government for purposes of preservation and research.

Preliminary excavations at the Nara Imperial Palace site were begun in 1955 under the auspices of the Nara National Cultural Properties Research Institute, and excavation and research activities at the site

have been conducted continuously since 1959. By the end of 1969, eighteen hectares, (fourteen percent of the total palace site) had been systematically excavated and studied. In the process, various sorts of new evidence which throw considerable light on the history and culture of ancient Japan have been unearthed, and the discovery of the wooden tablets dealt with in this report is certainly one of the most important among them.

The wooden tablets recovered from the Nara Palace site consist of flat pieces of wood on which records have been written in *sumi* (the traditional medium for writing in East Asia, an ink composed principally of oil soot and binders, which is applied with a brush after it has been ground and thinned to a proper consistency with water). In China, previous to the discovery of paper, a variety of materials such as bamboo, wood and hemp cloth had been utilized for keeping records, and they continued to be used for this purpose even after the manufacture of paper had become common. Among the wooden tablets recovered from sites in China, the latest date only up as far as the third and fourth centuries, and while it is not clear just how long this material continued to be used there for clerical purposes, the examples excavated in Japan will constitute important evidence in future investigation on this subject.

While it is true that scholars in Japan had been aware of the existence of a few isolated Japanese wooden tablets previous to the discovery of such objects at the Nara Palace site, it had always been commonly assumed that paper had served as the chief medium for record-keeping in ancient times, and the possibility that wooden strips might have been used in large quantities for this purpose does not seem to have been seriously pursued by anyone, and the few examples known at the time did not attract serious scholarly attention. However, in January of 1961, during the course of the Fifth Archaeological Research Project, wooden tablets began to come to light at the Nara Palace site, and from this time up until the end of 1968, the excavations produced about 20,000 examples, and it became quite clear that in ancient Japan these objects had been utilized in very large quantities, together with paper, as a material for the keeping of records. After their initial appearance at the Nara Palace site, wooden tablets subsequently began to come to light in various other localities, and examples going back to the seventh century (and thus predating the Nara Palace finds) were discovered. The value of these materials as a primary source of information about the culture of ancient Japan soon became obvious to those in scholarly circles.

The results of archaeological investigation at the Nara Palace site have been published in the series of reports entitled "Excavation Research Reports on the Nara Imperial Palace Site", four volumes of which have appeared to date. While the wooden tablets have been commented on in volumes II and IV in the sections on the areas where they were recovered, the present volume is the first of a separate series devoted exclusively to these materials and intended to deal with them in a comprehensive manner. It treats all the wooden tablets recovered over a period of time extending from the occasion when the first examples were discovered up until the 13th Research Project in 1963, and numbers 1925 examples. The following chart shows the number of specimens recovered and the locations where they came to light

		<i>location</i>	<i>amount</i>
1) Excavation Project	5 (1961)	Disposal pit site SK219	40
2) Excavation Project	7 (1962)	Well site SE311	2
3) Excavation Project	13 (1963)	Disposal pit site SK820	1843
4) Excavation Project	13 (1963)	Disposal pit site SK870	40

I WOODEN TABLET RECOVERY SITES

The wooden tablets treated here were recovered from the contents of an ancient well and at three disposal pit locations, but others have also been excavated from gutter sites and pillar depressions.

The wooden tablets have been excavated not only at sites within the palace boundaries, but also at various locations outside, and it is proper to say that future excavations will probably bring them to light at places spread across the largest part of the extensive area occupied by the eighth century metropolis.

i) Disposal Pit Site SK219

This site consists of two ancient rubbish disposal pits, one just to the south of the other and joined to it; both measure three meters east to west and three and a half meters north to south, and are one meter in depth. Various waste materials were apparently brought from the surrounding area and thrown into these pits. The contents, which filled the pits from their bottoms up to the level of the horizontal area excavations, were found to be in a surprisingly good state of preservation. Among the contents were a large number of earthenware relics and sherds, together with roof tile fragments, objects of wood, *hihada* (cy-

press bark used for roofing), and walnut and peach pits and other natural materials such as leaves. The wooden tablets were found principally in a strata of grey sand at the lowest level of the disposal pits.

Among the examples of unique interest which came to light here was *Wooden Tablet 1*, which bears an inscription with the name of a woman called Tsukuba-no-Myôbu, a functionary who served under the Retired Empress Kôken at the Hokkeji, a temple located just to the east of the Nara Palace site. The inscription consists of a requisition for various foodstuffs, such as red beans, soy sauce and condiments. An entry dated to the sixth year of the Tempyô-Hôji period (762) in the famous historical chronicle, the *Shoku-Nihongi*, describes vividly how, following the completion of a large-scale rebuilding of the Nara Palace, the Retired Empress Kôken and her successor, the Emperor Junnin, returned from a period of residence at a temporary palace (the Hora-no-miya) in the province of Omi (in present-day Shiga Prefecture), and the various events which took place as a result of the competition for power between Fujiwara-no-Nakamaro and the priest Dôkyô. The Retired Empress Kôken used the Hokkeji as her residence, and the fact that *Wooden Tablet 1* was actually used to request foodstuffs for this temple makes it an important and accurate document for corroborating the history of the time.

ii) Excavation Site SE311, an Ancient Well

The remains of three large wells were discovered in the same area as the rubbish disposal pits described above, and two wooden tablets were recovered from one of them. The well where these two wooden tablets came to light had an interior framework made of wooden planks measuring about three meters in length, thirty centimeters in width, and ten centimeters in thickness. These were assembled into a square well-shaft, designated here *Well-Shaft A*. Later, the well was repaired and a smaller well-shaft, measuring 1.9 meters across, was constructed inside, and we have designated it *Well-shaft B*. On the basis of the contents of these two well-shafts, it is presumed that *Well-shaft A* dates to the Nara Period (710-784), while *Well-shaft B* is thought to have been executed at the beginning of the ninth century when the Retired Emperor Heizei resided briefly at the Nara Palace location. One wooden tablet was found in each of the well-shafts.

iii) Disposal Pit Site SK820

A garbage disposal pit, measuring four meters in circumference and

2.3 in depth was discovered during excavations in the northeastern part of the exterior section of the remains of the second in the series of Imperial Domiciles erected within the Nara Palace. The layer of earth inside was composed of three separate strata. The lowest, approximately half a meter in thickness, was composed of natural materials, mainly leaves, while that above it, of about the same thickness, was composed of dark brown earth containing a large amount of organic matter. Here, wooden tablets were discovered in large numbers for the first time. Wooden objects were preserved in this strata in a surprisingly fresh state, and few of them exhibited any evidence of decomposition. Above was a third strata of reddish-brown clay, containing a few fragments of pottery and roof tiles. As a result of the investigation of the successive strata and their contents, the history of the waste disposal pit became clear: soon after the pit was dug, various natural materials, discarded artifacts and rubbish, together with earth and sand, were dumped into it, burying the contents. 63 wooden tablets with inscriptions dating them to specific years came to light here. 19 bore dates from the earlier part of the Nara Period, ranging from the Second Year of the Yôrô Period (718) to the Fourth Year of the Tempyô Period (732), and the contents of the inscriptions on all of them, written over this considerable span of years, indicated that they had served as tallies for the payment of taxes-in-kind in the form of unspun silk or salt. By contrast, the many examples (42 in number) from the short 3 year period from 745 to 747 (the 17th through the 19th years of the Tempyô Period) included not only specimens used in connection with the payment of taxes-in-kind, but also various communications between officials. The evidence provided by these wooden tablets, together with the other relics recovered from this earth layer, indicate that its upper limit cannot be very far removed in date from the year 747.

The materials treated in this report are the wooden tablets, some intact, but most in fragmentary form, which have been recovered in considerable numbers from sub-surface locations, and usually interred in conditions favorable for their preservation. However, of the total of 1843 examples, more than half consisted of shavings, removed from the wooden tablets with some sort of sharp blade, in order that new inscriptions could be written on the clean surface. When the wooden tablets and shavings were thrown away, they were most often already split or broken, or became so in the process, and thus more than eighty percent

came to light in a shattered or fragmentary state, while only about ten percent were intact.

On the basis of evidence supplied by the inscriptions, two important suppositions can be drawn about the areas in which the wooden tablets were excavated. The first is that one group of examples are related to the *Saigû* ("Western Palace"): these are numbers 91-134. The *Saigû* is noted in the *Shoku-Nihongi* as one of the Emperor's domiciles, and the inscriptions on these wooden tablets consist of requisitions for foodstuffs for the guards who protected it, men known as *Hyôe*, who were the offspring of provincial officials or nobles. On the basis of these inscriptions, it may be concluded that about the end of the Tempyô Period, the detached palace known as the *Saigû* was located in the general area where these wooden tablets were unearthed. The second assumption is that the section of the Emperor's domicile which he used as a daily residence was located in the area where tablets 363-407, 403-407, and 409-411 were excavated, the reason being that among these wooden tablets, which were used as tallies for tax purposes, a large number had inscriptions referring to foodstuffs sent to the Emperor, including certain fish and seaweed delicacies.

iv) Disposal Pit Site SK870

This site was discovered about twenty meters north of the north-eastern corner of the inner tile-roofed earth wall cloister of the second of the Imperial domiciles built at the Nara Palace site. The disposal pit site, rather irregular in shape, measured five meters east to west and north to south and was 1.3 meters deep. The remains of pottery and roof tiles were scattered throughout the excavated strata, as if they had been thrown inside at random, and the wooden tablets were intermixed with these contents. Because of the shallowness of the site, the objects were rather poorly preserved. In addition to inscriptions mentioning the government office known as the *Saejifu*, which administered the requisitioning of farmers from the entire country for the purpose of guarding the Imperial capital city, there are also two or three examples which bear what are presumed to be the names of common soldiers (*Eji*) who were recruited from the farming class. Because of the evidence of pottery remains at the site, it is presumed that it was abandoned as a disposal location about the end of the Tempyô-Hôji period, approximately 760.

II THE SHAPES OF THE WOODEN TABLETS

Because of their use for a specific purpose, the wooden tablets were fashioned initially according to a functional, standardized form; but as a result of subsequent modifications (such as shaving off the surfaces), or their use for some other purpose, most of the excavated examples no longer retained their original shapes. The wooden tablets recovered from the Nara Palace site can be divided into thirteen types on the basis of their shapes (see fig. 4).

Type 6011. Roughly like the shape of a *tanzaku* (a long, narrow strip of stiff paper on which poems are traditionally written); most of these examples were squared off at the ends. The contents of the inscriptions on these examples most often conform to the type already described under heading IV, i.

Type 6019. One end is intact, with a squared-off profile, but the original form is lost because the other end has been broken off or has rotted away.

Type 6021. Small in size and short in length, most of these examples were used as tallies, and were attached to bundles of textiles, thread and foodstuffs; some were rather crudely fashioned.

Type 6022. Small in size and short like the above example, but with the corners cut off obliquely. Carefully fashioned, with a small hole bored through just under the peak, these examples served as tallies, and were attached to foodstuffs or goods.

Type 6031. Fashioned like Type 6011 above, in the general shape of a *tanzaku*, but with the addition of notches on the right and left close to both ends. Some examples have squared ends, while others have ends like the type just above. They were used as tallies.

Type 6032. Fashioned in the shape of a *tanzaku* but with notches on the right and left on only one end. Some have square ends while others have the corners cut off obliquely like the examples above. Most of these examples were also used as tallies.

Type 6033. Notched on right and left like the example above, but sharpened to a point on the other end. The majority were used as tallies.

Type 6039. *Tanzaku*-like in profile with notches right and left, but with the opposite end gone either because of breaking or rotting; the original form thus unclear, but undoubtedly either Type 6031,

6032 or 6033.

Type 6051. *Tanzaku*-like in shape, but with the bottom end sharpened to a point. Most of the top ends are square. Many were used as tallys.

Type 6059. Apparently originally *tanzaku*-like in shape. Sharpened to a point on one end, but with the other end either broken off or rotted away. While the original shape is thus unclear, it undoubtedly conforms to that of either Type 6033 or Type 6051.

Type 6061. Examples fashioned of wood whose original function can be determined with some confidence, such as ladles or round container-boxes, as well as sections of such objects on which inscriptions have been written.

Type 6065. These examples, fashioned from wood, appear to have served some function originally, but this is no longer clear. Some of them bear inscriptions.

Type 6081. This group consists of fragments whose original shapes are unclear because of breakage, splitting or rotting. Their original shapes must conform to one of those described in the categories above.

Type 6091. This group consists of shavings from wooden tablets. The chips shaved off during this process have been discovered in large quantities and are classified together in a single group.

III THE INSCRIPTIONS ON THE WOODEN TABLETS

The inscriptions which appear on the wooden tablets may be divided into the following general groups:

i) Records and Accounts

These consist of everyday transactions between various government offices within the Imperial Palace complex, such as the receipt and disbursement (payments, claims, purchases, etc.) of various materials, as well as receipts for the transfer of clothing for officials, and some simple communications. One of the characteristic features of this category is the large number of claims submitted by officials requesting foodstuffs.

ii) Taxation Tallies

According to the laws and ordinances dealing with taxation (the *Buyakuryô*), silk and the other textiles which served as taxes-in-kind (known as *Chô* and *Yô*) were to have the following information written

on their borders: province, district, village, name of the head of the family, personal name, year, month and day. In the case of salt, hoes, marine products such as fish, seaweed, and shellfish, as well as grains such as rice and wheat, the above information was to be written on a wooden tally and attached to the material or its wrapping. In the present study, there are as many as 171 examples of materials which served as taxes-in-kind (categories such as *chô*, *chûnan-sakumotsu*, *zôyaku*, *nie*, *hakumai*, etc.). See plates 3, 4, 34-70.

iii) Tallys Attached to Articles

These wooden tablets were used as tallys and attached to various kinds of articles in order to arrange and store them (plates 3, 4, 77-71, 143). Affixed to goods such as various marine products and types of seaweed, soy-sauce, oak leaves, and braziers, tallys of this sort continued to be used for the same purpose for many centuries in Japan,

iv) Wooden Tablets Used for Practicing Calligraphy or Scribbling

During periods of rest from their duties, officials practiced composition and calligraphy, and examples of these activities provide us with an accurate idea of the calligraphic styles of the period and various of the interests and tastes of the official class. See plates 13, 29, 78-89.

IV THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WOODEN TABLETS AS HISTORICAL MATERIALS

This section may be divided into two topics: the first relates to the role played by the wooden tablets as materials for the research and study of the archaeological site itself (in this case the Nara Palace site), while the second deals with the factual and documentary information furnished by the wooden tablets, and the consequent advancement in our knowledge about various aspects of ancient Japanese history which were formerly unclear. No accurate evaluation of the unique importance of the wooden tablets as historical material is possible without considering both of these topics. Two points should be noted in reference to the first:

a) Determining the Nature of Sites

As already described in Volume II of the series "Excavation Reports on the Nara Imperial Palace Site", location SK219 is a disposal pit site located in an area which seems to have been occupied originally by the government bureau in charge of the

preparation of food for the Emperor and government officials (the *Kunaishô-Daizenshiki*), while location SK820 (also a disposal pit site) is located in the confines of the *Dairi*, the Emperor's domicile, located in the center of the Imperial Palace. The identification of these sites is based in part on evidence provided by inscriptions on the wooden tablets excavated from them. While the extensive excavations and subsequent research carried out at the site of the Nara Palace have revealed the locations of various of the government bureaus, the importance of the wooden tablets as a direct source of documentary material in this research cannot be overemphasized.

b) Determining the Dates of Sites, their Remains and Relics

The buildings of the Nara Palace were reconstructed a number of times, and there are many cases where the sites of foundations overlap in successive layers of strata. In a complicated archaeological circumstance of this sort, where the remains of various buildings of different dates exist in close juxtaposition, the possibility that the dates in the inscriptions on certain of the wooden tablets can serve to verify the dating of the remains is of obvious importance. Furthermore, it is frequently the case that the dates in the inscriptions are effective in helping to establish the dating of the other objects deposited together with the wooden tablets in the waste disposal pits, assorted objects such as wooden implements, pottery, and roof tiles. Of equal importance is the fact that the inscriptions have also been instrumental in speeding up research on the chronological assignments of a significant percentage of the relics unearthed at the Nara Palace site.

In dealing with the second topic, headings i) and ii) discussed under section III above, are of particular importance. The wooden tablets which are grouped under heading i) consist of transactions, records, and simple communications between various government bureaus, and the recovery of each one has provided us with some new piece of material for studying ancient Japanese history. Examples excavated at location SK820 provide an interesting illustration. Many of these specimens consist of requisitions for foodstuffs by the soldiers who were responsible for guarding the Emperor's domicile, men known as *Toneri*. As a result of the information in their inscriptions, various details of

the Imperial Palace and its routine have become clear. Thus, we now know the number and location of the palace gates, and the number of soldiers on duty at each of them both day and night, as well as the formation of the units in which these soldiers served. Formerly, specialists in ancient Japanese history had firmly contended that the *Toneri* were natives of the Kantô region in eastern Japan, but we now know from the names which appear on the wooden tablets that many were from the Kinki region, the extensive area which surrounds Nara.

As we have already noted, the wooden tablets grouped together under heading i) consist of various daily records and transactions by the central government bureaus, and this material raises an important subject for investigation, namely, what was the relationship between these wooden documents and others of the same period written on paper? At the same time, it also seems relevant here to ask the basic question why were the wooden tablets actually necessary and what function did they serve? Fortunately we possess a great number of eighth century paper documents, many thousands in fact, that have been preserved in the famous Shôsôin repository. These are official records and communications and date to the same period as the wooden tablets from the Nara Palace site. Contentwise, they include census registrations, tax collection ledgers, annual financial reports submitted to the central government by provincial government offices, monthly accounting reports on construction projects carried out by the government and temples, and other important undertakings such as the copying of sutras.

There can be little doubt that in eighth century Japan paper constituted the favored material for documents. On the other hand, the wooden tablets, measuring roughly twenty centimeters in length and four in width (while there seems to be no standard size, those with these approximate dimensions are most numerous) provided a writing surface which is obviously restricted in size and only appropriate for short or abbreviated inscriptions. For this reason they were extensively utilized in the simpler, day-to-day clerical work of various government bureaus; as handy, brief reminders in the receipt and distribution of commodities; and in the daily requisitioning of foodstuffs for officials. Their use for these purposes also reflects the greater strength and permanence of wood as a medium for documents in comparison to paper. Recently, wooden tablets dating back to the seventh century have begun to come to light

as a result of excavations at the sites of the Asuka and Fujiwara Palaces in the southern part of the Nara plain. When these examples have been carefully studied and related to those from the Heijō Palace sites, the day when an accurate evaluation of the historical position of the wooden tablets in Japan can be arrived at will not be far in the future.

The next category, grouped under heading ii) are the tallys originally attached to the various goods and commodities which were sent to the central government as taxes-in-kind. These tallys demonstrate very clearly how the national tax system of the period operated. Preserved in the Shōsōin repository are many examples of the several types of textiles which were commonly sent to the central government as tribute by the provincial governments. As we have already noted, each one of these bears an inscription written in *sumi* recording information such as the name of the province where it had been manufactured and the name of the official who had presented the material, in accordance with the legal ordinances of the period. In addition, each one invariably bears the stamped seal impression of the province. Consequently, we know that it was standard practice to write certain required information on commodities submitted as taxes-in-kind, directly on the surface in the case of textiles, and on a tally which was affixed to the wrapping in the case of salt, hoes, fish, seaweed, and the like. These inscriptions are detailed, and include the province or district, village, names of the head of the family, and the individual taxpayer, the category of tax, name of the commodity, the amount included, and year, month and day. In certain cases, the name of the local official who wrote the inscription is also added. This stringent tax system was instituted in accordance with the new legal structure implemented during the second half of the seventh century, and during the eighth century, the period of the Nara Palace, this system was brought to its point of highest development. By the late eighth century, however, this highly organized system was showing obvious signs of general disintegration, and it was already abandoned by the end of the century.

As a result of the excavation and study of the wooden tablets, our knowledge of a number of details and circumstances of eighth century Japan are much clearer; they have provided us with significant information about the types of taxes, the special products of various provinces, the method of recording provincial government divisions (pro-

vince, county, village) and their respective geographical names, as well as the names of people from the various regions. Moreover, the value of this information is all the more precious because of the scarcity of other reliable materials on the period. We know from the wooden tablets, for example, that certain provinces were outstanding for the amount of salt they sent to the capital. These include Owari (Chita, county, Aichi Prefecture), Wakasa (the area around the City of Obama in Fukui Prefecture), Suô (Ôshima county, Yamaguchi Prefecture) and Kii (Wakayama Prefecture). Furthermore, the foodstuffs specially presented to the Emperor as tribute offerings (known as *Mi-nie* and *Ô-nie*) were, in actuality, another form of tax, and the fact that the wooden tablets have provided us with the documentation to clarify the actual operation of this system demonstrates another aspect of their value and importance.

Chronologicval Table

Era Name	Year	Emperor or Empress's name
Wadô (和銅) 1	708	Gemmei (元明)
Reiki (靈龜) 1	715	Gensei (元正)
Yôrô (養老) 1	717	"
Sinki (神龜) 1	724	Shômu (聖武)
Tempyô (天平) 1	729	"
Tempyô-Kampô 1 (天平感宝)	749	Kôken (孝謙)
Tempyô-Shôhô 1 (天平勝宝)	749	"
Tempyô-Hôji 1(天平宝字)	757	"
2	758	Junnin (淳仁)
8	764	Shôtoku (称徳)
Tempyô-Jingo 1 (天平神護)	765	"
Jingo-Keiun 1 (神護景雲)	767	"
Hôki (宝龜) 1	770	Kônin (光仁)
Ten'ô (天応) 1	781	Kammu (桓武)
Enryaku (延暦) 1	782	"