



Reproduction of a silk twill textile, woven in Japan, imitating a Sasanian Persian original, from the Shōsōin repository in Nara (originally held in Hōryūji Temple), sixth to seventh centuries. Source: *Smart History* website at <https://tinyurl.com/rccnsyvd>.

Beyond the Sinosphere in Early Japan **NARA AND THE SILK ROADS**

By Todd Munson

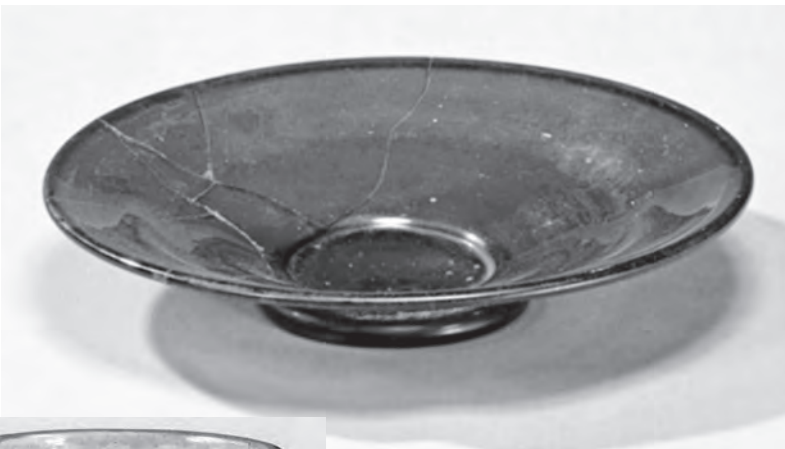
A startling archeological discovery in 2009, near the ruins of the Heijō Palace in Nara: nineteen dark green shards, later determined to be ceramics produced during the Abbasid Caliphate in present-day Iraq. The shards were originally from a jar, perhaps used to carry spices or dates; a wooden tablet found nearby records the date as 768 CE. How might such an object have found its way to the Japanese archipelago, some 5,000 miles away, over 1,000 years ago? Anyone traveling with ceramics, even for a short car ride, knows of their fragile nature—for an item to have safely journeyed one-fifth the distance of the globe suggests an extraordinary tale waiting to be told.

Japan's history of assimilating foreign influence is most often told from two frames of reference: first, the era of borrowing from Korea and China from the prehistorical period through the 700s; and second, the wholesale importation of Western culture and technology in the wake of Japan's forced "opening" to the West in the 1850s.¹ While this observation is not inaccurate, we may also say that substantial transmission of non-East Asian cultures came during the *former* period, due to overland and maritime trade routes across Eurasia—that is, the fabled "silk roads."² From the great cities of Antioch, Alexandria, Baghdad, and Samarkand, goods and ideas flowed to the Tang Dynasty capital of Chang'an, and from there across China proper and the East Sea. The nascent imperial state had long sought diplomatic, mercantile, and religious engagement with Korea and China, which had emerged from centuries of division into the resurgent Sui and Tang dynasties. During this era, Japan absorbed from the continent not just China's culture, but also something of its cosmopolitan character; by the time the imperial capital of Heijō (now Nara) was established in 710, the symbolic "terminus" of the Silk Roads had reached a new eastern frontier. This brief essay will explore select aspects of Silk Roads culture in early Japan, a millennia before Japan's better-known assimilation of non-East Asian culture during the Meiji period.

Prior to the Nara Period

Japan did not utilize a written language until the seventh century, so archeology assumes an outside role in the search for initial contacts between the archipelago and civilizations beyond East Asia. In particular, excavations of *kofun* (large, mounded tombs, built primarily between the third and seventh centuries CE) have revealed compelling connections between Japan and distant cultures. Though we cannot know with confidence who was interred therein, the scale and extravagance of many *kofun* suggest rulers of considerable power and authority.

In 1963, two pieces of glassware—a bowl and a dish, placed together like a teacup and saucer—were among the grave goods excavated in Nara Prefecture from a tomb believed to date to the fifth century. The facet-cut bowl, of a transparent pale green, was likely the product of the Sasanian (or Sassanid) Empire, a



pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty that existed in West Asia from the third through the seventh centuries CE. Similar bowls, linked by visual and chemical analyses, have been found as far as Egypt and Denmark. The shallow dish, of deep blue-colored glass, is believed to be Roman in origin, possibly produced in a workshop on the western side of the Euphrates. Intriguingly, it appears that a bird, horse, person, and plants were once drawn in a Central Asian style on the inner surface of the dish, although the images have now been almost entirely worn away. Scholars suggest the creation and painting of the dish may have occurred in different times and places.

Another important discovery occurred in 2012 at a tomb in Nagaoka, near present-day Kyoto. Three specimens of tiny doughnut-shaped bead jewelry, made with glass and layers of gold leaf, were unearthed in a fifth-century kofun. Chemical

analyses suggest their production somewhere in the Roman Empire, and similar examples have been found in distant locales such as South Asia, Persia, and Egypt. Because caches of glass beads have also been found on the Korean peninsula (particularly in the ancient state of Paechke, an ally) scholars suggest the Nagaoka examples were likely imported from the continent, and possibly buried as family heirlooms.

Finally, the Fujinoki kofun in Nara, one of the few found intact when excavated in 1985, revealed a host of unique funerary objects from the sixth and seventh centuries—many of Chinese and Japanese origin, but others from much farther afield. They include a bronze mirror festooned with phoenix and dragon designs, likely of Scythian origin; a gilt crown strikingly similar to some discovered in Afghanistan; and numerous horse trappings with Chinese and Indo-Iranian images of elephants, lions, and tigers, among other exotic creatures. Some objects from the tomb feature design motifs originating from beyond East Asia, such as the hexagon (Roman) and the floral palmette (Iranian).

Indian Religious Influences

The era of large-scale tomb construction declined in the seventh century, very likely due to a change in burial practices related to the introduction of Buddhism in Japan. The faith, originating in northern India a millennium earlier, endured a lengthy and arduous trek across the Middle East and Central Asia before reaching the Sinosphere. From China, Buddhism spread to Korea, where the state of Paechke proffered statuary and sutras to Japan's Emperor Kinmei in either 538 or 552 CE (scholars suggest, however, an earlier unofficial introduction is likely). By the seventh century, Buddhism had spread beyond the confines of the imperial court and begun to impact the culture at large.

Of course, Buddhism never “traveled solo” on Silk Roads, nor did it exist in isolation from the greater religious context of its origin. Many aspects of the Indian religious universe, some pre-Buddhist in nature, journeyed alongside Buddhism during its travels across the Asian continent. For example, a surprisingly large number of Hindu deities was introduced, along with esoteric forms of Buddhism in the eighth and ninth centuries. Since Buddhism and the indigenous faith of Shinto are both nonexclusive traditions, one might say there was room for everyone in the Japanese pantheon. Space forbids an in-depth exploration of Hindu

deities in Buddhist cosmology, but the following are examples one might introduce in a classroom setting.

The wrathful guardian kings known in Japanese as *Niō* were said to have followed and protected the historical Buddha during his travels, and intimidating statues of the pair are often placed at either side of temple gates in East Asia. Agyō and Ungyō, the thirteenth-century, twenty-six-foot-tall wooden guardians of Nara's Todaiji Temple, are perhaps the most famous examples of the pair in Japan. On one side stands Agyō, a manifestation of the Vairocana Buddha (the “truth-body” of the historical Buddha); his open mouth symbolizes the beginning of all things. On the other stands closed-mouth Ungyō, a manifestation of Vishnu, one of three main gods of Hinduism. Many such examples may be found across East Asia.

Another remarkable example of Indian religio-cultural influence is the septet known as *Shichifukujin*, or “Seven Lucky Gods,” a popular motif in Japanese visual culture since the medieval period. Arriving in their “treasure boat” at New Year's to bestow blessings on the people, the Seven Lucky Gods have been featured in paintings, woodblock prints, figurines, charms, *netsuke* (ornamental drawstring figurines), and even anime and video games. Of their number, only one (Ebisu, god of merchants and the sea) is Japanese in origin, while three more come from China (Hotei, abundance and health; Fukurokuju, happiness and long life; and Jurōjin, wisdom). The rest of the group—Bishamonten, Daikokuten, and Benzaiten—are Hindu deities who followed



The round blue glass plate (top) and cut glass bowl (bottom) originated in Sassanid Persia (226–651). They were found in Niizawa Senzuka-kofun Tumulus Cluster in the southern part of Kashihara City, Nara Prefecture. Source: *News Network Archaeology* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yfynx6ww>. Photos by © Shosin Repository.



Agyō (left) and Ungyō (right), ca. 1203, Nandaimon (Great South Gate), Todaiji, Nara, Japan.

Source: *Khan Academy* website at <https://tinyurl.com/vc249ffb>. *Asahi Shimbun* file photo.

Buddhism's path along Central and East Asia. The word "ten" appended their names, in fact, derives from the Sanskrit word *deva*, or deity.

The ferocious Bishamonten, originally known as Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera, is the Hindu guardian of the northern direction and the patron saint of warriors. Bishamonten was "repurposed" in early Buddhism as a defender of the dharma (Buddhist teachings), similar to the Niō guardian pair mentioned above. He is generally depicted wearing armor, holding a spear, and sometimes standing on demons he has vanquished. Bishamonten also holds in either hand a small pagoda said to contain either the Buddha's teachings or Buddhist relics, and in this sense is also regarded as a deity of treasure and fortune. Daikokuten, a jolly, stout figure, was originally the fearsome Hindu god Mahakala, though he has evolved over time into a benevolent deity of agricultural surplus and, by extension, wealth. He is depicted carrying a "wish-granting mallet" and bag of treasure, and standing upon two bales of rice.

Finally, Benzaiten (also known by the abbreviated name Benten) is one of Japan's most widely venerated *kami*, a patron deity of water, music, art, and literature. The sole female among the Seven Lucky Gods, she is most often shown wearing flowing robes and holding a *biwa* (lute, an instrument of Central Asian design). Benzaiten was originally the Hindu river goddess Sarasvatī and was introduced to Japan via China as a multiarmed defender of Buddhism. In later centuries, she lost her ferocious aspect (and extra limbs) but has remained strongly connected with water and related phenomena that are said to "flow," such as the creative arts, wisdom, and even time itself. Because of Benzaiten's close connection to water and maritime safety, it is no surprise that the Japanese archipelago is home to thousands of shrines dedicated to this deity, many near the sea or along the coast.

Central and South Asian Visitors

Having adopted a system of writing from China sometime in the seventh century, Japan's earliest chronicles offer glimpses into contacts between the archipelago and cultures, goods, and peoples outside of the Sinosphere. The *Nihon Shoki*, a semihistorical record of Japan's early history completed in 720, reports that groups of men and women from Tokharistan—a kingdom in Central Asia also known as Bactria and home to many different ethnic groups—washed ashore in a pair of separate incidents in the 650s. One of the Tokhari individuals, alternately rendered as Dachia or Dārāy, later pays his respects at the imperial court and requests to return to his home country with a large retinue. Sadly, these incomplete accounts are all we hear of such early visitors—though their mere mention in the chronicles suggests their novelty and importance to the early Japanese state.

Arrivals from distant India, though rare, also appear in ancient legends and records. Possibly the first was Hōdō, an ascetic who reputedly journeyed from India to China, Korea, and Japan sometime in the seventh century. Divinely inspired by a message from the Hindu deity Bishamonten, Hōdō is credited as the founder of several still-extant Buddhist temples in central Japan.



Benzaiten Playing Lute. Woodblock print by Utamaro II. Japanese, Edo period. Source: The Boston Museum of Fine Arts website at <https://tinyurl.com/35spheme>.

An advertisement for the Association for Asian Studies. The background features a dark, textured image of ancient Asian carvings. In the top left corner, there is a circular logo with a map of Asia and the text "Association for Asian Studies". In the center, a large white circle contains the text "DONATE TO ASIAN STUDIES". Below this circle, the text reads "HELP US TEACH THE WORLD ABOUT ASIA" and "...and claim a tax deduction". On the left side, under the heading "HOW DONATIONS ARE UTILIZED:", there is a list of four bullet points. On the right side, there is a call to action: "Visit www.asianstudies.org for more information". At the bottom, a line of text states: "The AAS is a 501(c)(3) corporation and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law."



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The Shōsōin Repository, Nara, Japan. Source: Khan Academy website at <https://tinyurl.com/n22ehf6t>.

A more verifiable visitor from the subcontinent was Bodhisena (704–760), who returned with Japanese emissaries from China in the 760s. Known in Japan as Baramon Sōjō, or the “Brahmin Buddhist Bishop,” Bodhisena is best remembered for his participation in the inaugural “eye-opening” ceremony for the national temple Tōdaiji in 752. The construction of the temple and its enormous bronze Buddha were signature accomplishments of the Nara period and reflected Emperor Shōmu’s desire to

transform Buddhism into a national religion. Having a priest from the birthplace of Buddhism serve as officiant surely lent an authoritative air to the proceedings. Though Bodhisena continued to teach Sanskrit and expound the dharma in Japan until his death in 760, little is known of his later life.

The Middle East

Both texts and artifacts suggest that Silk Roads trading routes introduced the Middle Eastern world to Japan. A figure mentioned in another imperially commissioned chronicle, the *Shoku Nihongi* (797), was Li Mi-i or Ri Mitsuei, an Iranian who traveled from Tang China with Bodhisena in 736. According to the record, he received an audience with Emperor Shōmu and received ranks in accordance with his social

status. Some scholars have speculated that Li Mi-i was a doctor, but there is no consensus and no further mention of this tantalizing character. Reference to a second Iranian may have been found via an inscription on a *mokkan* (wooden tablet) dating to Nara in the 600s. Though discovered decades ago, only recently has infrared technology rendered legible the name inscribed on the tablet—that of an official who may have been employed at a teaching academy where government officials were trained. One scholar suggests that the individual may have been teaching mathematics, given ancient Iran’s expertise in the subject.

Other Iranian cultural imports include incense, which like Buddhism, arrived in Japan via India, China, and Korea. In the treasury of the Hōryūji Temple near Nara—one of the earliest in Japan, dating to the early 600s CE—there exists incense that arrived via Sogdian trade. Sogdians, an Iranian people who lived in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from the fifth century CE onward, were merchants and agriculturalists who benefited more than any other ethnic group from the Silk Roads trade—described by some as the first intercultural “influencers.” The incense, which likely arrived via the maritime “road” through India and Sumatra, is inscribed with the name of the owner—written in Pahlavi script, of Iranian origin—and marked with a Sogdian stamp, possibly indicating its price and weight. For whatever reason, this particular incense block was never used, leaving a compelling reminder of the material culture Buddhism brought from South Asia.

The Shōsōin Treasury

The heart of Silk Roads culture in Nara—indeed, in all of Japan—is the Shōsōin, an eighth-century wooden storehouse on the grounds of the temple–monastery Tōdaiji. The Shōsōin is home to a vast assemblage of Buddhist artifacts, as might be expected, but also contains the personal belongings of Emperor Shōmu, donated after his death by his widow in 756. Shōmu’s collection—glass, musical instruments, textiles, and

other objects from Japan, China, Korea, Greece, Iran, and other countries—has often been described as the “final destination” of the Silk Roads. What is most remarkable about the treasures of the Shōsōin, perhaps, is not simply their quantity and diversity, but also their condition: unlike the ancient *kofun*, the Shōsōin sufficed to keep many objects in near-mint condition for centuries. Built without nails, the structure has been flexible enough to withstand earthquakes, while its raised-floor construction protects against humidity.³

Many objects in the Shōsōin reflect the interest in, and exposure to, Iranian culture in Tang Dynasty China. Among Shōmu’s treasures is a group of silver ewers from the Sasanian Empire, an ancient Iranian dynasty that ruled from the third to seventh centuries. One ewer features a pair of dancers, identified as Anahita, Iranian goddess of fertility—though a near-identical object in the Cleveland Museum of Art suggests they may be Zoroastrians, or even followers of the Roman god Bacchus. The treasury also houses three glass cups of Sasanian origin; unlike those excavated in archeological digs, these items remain in near-pristine condition, some of the very few examples of their kind in the world. One is a deep blue goblet, made of glass and silver, while another is transparent and facet-cut, quite similar to the *kofun*-excavated example mentioned above.

The Shōsōin collection reveals another important link between Central and East Asia: the performing arts. The storehouse holds five extraordinary examples of the lute, a product of Central Asian origin known



Tang period mulberry wood lute inlaid with mother of pearl. Known in Japan as a *Kuwanoki no genia* and in China as a *pipa*. Located in the Shōsōin Repository, Nara, Japan. Source: Khan Academy website at <https://tinyurl.com/n22ehf6t>. Photo by © Shōsōin Repository.

in Japanese as the *biwa*. They are extravagant objects; one, made from sandalwood with mother-of-pearl inlay, features the exotic scene of an Iranian man on camelback. There is also a group of masks used in *giga-ku*, an ancient form of drama performance originating in Korea. Though specifics of the genre have been lost to time—there are no records of performances, scores, or scripts—many masks are still extant, several of which feature characters from Central Asia and beyond. For example, one mask of a “drunken barbarian king” clearly depicts a man of non-East Asian origin, with an elongated nose, horsehair beard and mustache, pierced earlobes, and a cap of central Asian style. A similar mask is held in the Tokyo National Museum.

Though most objects in the collection were restricted to imperial elites, textiles in the treasury feature design motifs that were likely replicated on fabrics of all kinds. In that respect, they are among the most broadly diffused aspects of Silk Roads material culture. For example, a white marble slab with relief of a supernatural “tiger” features a swirling foliage pattern known as *karakusa* (Chinese or foreign grass), which also appears on Sasanian and Byzantine textiles. Other arabesque-style patterns in the Shōsōin include the palmette, from Egypt, and the grapevine, originally from Ancient Greece. Remarkably, these patterns are popular even today on kimono, wrapping cloths, and origami paper.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, it has not been the intention of this essay to diminish the vast impact of China and Korea on Japanese civilization in the first several centuries of the Common Era. However, it is important to recognize that (1) the Sinosphere was itself strongly influenced by neighbors near and far via the overland and maritime Silk Roads; and (2) that South Asia’s impact in East Asia, and Japan in particular, extends beyond the confines of Buddhism. In sum, we may suggest that Japan’s relations with the “West” in some ways began over 1,000 years ago—perhaps even before that green ceramic jar had made its way to Nara, full of spices and dates. ■

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NOTES

1. Though “Japan” as a formal state did not exist prior to the seventh century, I will use the term for convenience’s sake throughout this essay to refer to the archipelago in general.
2. The “roads,” actually a series of trade routes across the Eurasian continent, also include maritime trade through South Asian and Chinese ports. Readers interested in learning more about this topic will benefit from Morris Rossabi’s article “The Silk Roads: An Educational Resource,” *EAA* 4, no. 1 (1999): 16–20.
3. As a wooden storehouse cannot protect against fire, the treasures were relocated to concrete structures after WWII.

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Gigaku Mask (No. 47) of Suiko-ō, the “Intoxicated Barbarian King.” Japan, eighth century CE. Carved Paulownia wood with white undercoating, polychrome pigments, gold leaf, and ink drawing. Shōsōin Repository.

Source: Freer/Sackler website at <https://tinyurl.com/4pxfu9kt>. Photo by © Shōsōin Repository.