

Ō no Yasumaro's grave (Konose-chō, Nara city)

Ō no Yasumaro is famed as compiler of the chronicle *Kojiki*, completed in 712 as the oldest historical work in Japan. The *Shoku Nihongi* chronicle records his conferrals of rank, and also his death in the 7th month of 723, at which time he held the post of Director of the Ministry of Popular Affairs.

The grave of Ō no Yasumaro is located in Kose-chō, about 7 km east in straight line distance from the prefecture government office in the city of Nara, and was discovered by accident during the work of replanting a tea field on the southern slope of a hill in January, 1979. With the proper reporting of the find to authorities by the discoverer, and the conduct in quick fashion of an archaeological investigation, it became a valuable example in which the structure of the grave and the conditions of discovery of the epitaph are clearly known, very rare for graves of the Nara period.

At the time of investigation the mound over the grave had already been leveled, but within a square burial pit 180 cm on a side a wooden chest had been placed and covered with charcoal, and it had apparently contained the cremated bones and four pearls. The wooden chest was made of Japanese umbrella pine, and was about 65 cm long by 38 cm wide and 38 cm high. Underneath the chest a plaque engraved with an epitaph of 41 characters had been placed face down. The plaque was a board made of nearly pure copper, 29.1 cm long by 6.1 cm wide. The thickness was only 0.5 mm on average, and the characters that had been pounded into it protruded as ridges on the back side. Another figure of the same era, Oharida Yasumaro, who moreover held the same court rank of Junior 4th Rank, Lower Grade, had an epitaph-engraved plaque of the same size, but it was 4 mm thick. Others of the Asuka and Nara periods are around 3–5 mm, so that of Ō no Yasumaro is characterized by being outstandingly thin. The following account was written on the face in two vertical lines.

Ō no Yasumaro, Junior 4th Rank, Lower Grade, 5th Grade Order of Merit, who lived in East 4th Ward on 4th Street, died on the 6th day, 7th month, 723 [Inscribed on] 15th day, 12th month [by] Ki no Tomi

It thus gives his place of residence, court rank and level of achieved merit, as well as his name and date of death. From this the grave was clearly identified as that of Ō no Yasumaro, and his place of residence also became known for the first time.

Through a 3D scanning measurement and careful inspection of the plaque carried out in 2012, between the lines of text of the epigraph, traces of the outlines of characters were detected. Traces matching five characters in the lower portion of the first line, and seven matching those near the end of the second line, were positioned to the lower left and below the actual engraved characters. As the shapes and intervals of the traces closely match the engraved characters, they are possibly the remains of a draft written before the actual engraving.

The epitaph-bearing plaque and the four pearls have been designated an Important Cultural Property, and are currently part of the regular exhibit at The Museum, Archaeological Institute of Kashihara. Also, lacquer peeling profiles taken of the charcoal and soil strata from the grave have been used to make a reconstructed model, which is also part of the regular exhibit.