

Takamatsuzuka tomb

The Takamatsuzuka mound was known early on from Edo period literature and drawings, but when it became known locally that dressed stones of volcanic tuff had appeared in a pit used for storing agricultural produce, it once again became the focus of attention. In 1972, it was decided to conduct an excavation as a commemorative project for Asuka Village, with the Nara prefectural Archaeological Institute of Kashihara undertaking the investigation and Prof. Aboshi Yoshinori supervising at the site. In that investigation, continental-style polychrome mural paintings were discovered for the first time in Japan, setting off a boom of interest in ancient history.

The Takamatsuzuka tomb is a round mound 23 m in diameter constructed with the tamped-earth method, and in the center was a stone compartment with a horizontal entrance. The dressed stone was white volcanic tuff from Mt. Nijō, and the internal dimensions of the compartment measured 103.5 cm wide, 113.4 cm high, by 265.2 cm long. The stone compartment was structured as a box made of floor, wall, and ceiling stones, and the interior surfaces were finished with plaster on which murals were painted. It was not possible to confirm the existence of a painting on the southern face because it had been damaged by robbers in the Medieval period.

The murals depicted the four directional deities (the blue dragon Seiryū, guardian of the east, on the eastern wall; the white tiger Byakko on the western wall; the black tortoise Genbu on the northern wall; the southern deity Suzaku, a red bird, presumably on the damaged south wall), groups of human figures (four men, and separately, four women, on both the eastern and western walls), an image of the sun (on the eastern wall) and of the moon (on the western wall), and constellations of stars (drawn on the ceiling). The women in the groups are seen holding fans, hair switches, and scepters, while the objects held by men include a long-handled parasol, a bundled sword, a chair, a bundled spear, and a *gitchō* (an item resembling a hockey stick). The sun image is covered in gold leaf, and the moon image in silver leaf, and both have expressions of clouds made with straight lines drawn in red across their faces.

From within the stone compartment, a lacquered wooden coffin, a gilt-bronze openwork floral motif ornament, six-lobed ornamental nail seats, nails, and so forth were recovered. The coffin is reconstructed as 199.5 cm long by 58 cm wide. There was also a portion of bone thought to represent the interred, and as a result of analysis he was thought to have been a male of mature age. Because the tomb had been robbed only a few grave goods were found, but silver sword ornaments, beads, and a mirror with a design of sea beasts and grapes (identical items from the same mold include one from the Duhu Sizhen tomb in Xi'an, China) were recovered.

The mound has been nationally designated a Special Historic Site, the murals a National Treasure, and the recovered items are Important Cultural Properties.