

Nekozuka tomb, Nekozuka Kita No. 1 coffin

On the northern side of the Nara Palace (Special Historic Site) are the remains of the Shōrin'en garden. Beginning with an entry in the *Shoku Nihongi* chronicle for the third day of the third month of 729 (the first year of the Tenpyō era), a record of the Emperor Shōmu feasting a large gathering of retainers at Shōrin'en, banquets were frequently held at this location. Shōrin'en encompasses a portion of the western subgroup of the Saki tomb group, comprised of tombs such as Shiozuka, Oseyama, and Konabe which were built from the latter half of the fourth into the fifth centuries, and its outer perimeter was enclosed with a roofed wall of tamped-earth.

Nekozuka is thought to have been a keyhole-shaped tomb with a mound length of around 120 m, but as it stood at the location of the roofed wall on the southern side of Shōrin'en, the mound had been greatly altered. In 1953 a salvage excavation was carried out in conjunction with the taking of fill from the site. The burial facility was a vertical stone chamber measuring 4.6 m in overall length by 1.28 m in width, and is thought to have contained a wooden split-log coffin. Twenty-one ring-shaped stone bracelets, 8 straight swords, and 22 short blades (spearheads) were recovered. The artifacts are in the collection of the Nara National Museum. In addition, there are records of artifacts such as a mirror with a deity and horse cart motif in raised relief, iron swords, wheel-shaped stone bracelets, cylindrical jasper beads, and a comma-shaped bead of jade being found. Further, in 1983 an excavation was conducted at the north side of the mound, and a clay compartment for a wooden coffin (Nekozuka Kita No. 1) was found. This is thought to have been a burial facility situated at the top of the tomb's outer rampart, or perhaps was from a tomb located in the manner of a subsidiary mound. From within the clay compartment, stone objects in the shape of bracelets, a lidded container, cylindrical beads, and a comma-shaped bead were recovered. The stone bracelets included 5 wheel-shaped items of various forms, and 6 ring-shaped items. The ring-shaped bracelets included 3 items of steatite. One of the latter had a sawtooth pattern carved onto both its upper and lower surfaces, hence a pattern that completely diverged from the shell bracelets that were the original model.

Both the Nekozuka tomb and the Nekozuka Kita No. 1 coffin facility are thought to have been built at the same time, in the latter half of the Early Kofun period. Nekozuka is a mid-sized keyhole tomb constructed at a relatively early stage within the Saki tomb group, and its relationship with such large-scale keyhole tombs as Saki Misasagiya and Saki Ishizukayama, over 200 m long and of the same period, is an object of interest. Further, as the Nekozuka Kita No. 1 coffin, which is in a subordinate position from the perspective of the Nekozuka tomb, contained an abundance of grave goods, the relationship between these two also draws interest.