Inscribed Objects and the Development of Literature in Early Japan by Joshua Frydman (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Inscribed Objects and the Development of Literature in Early Japan. By Joshua Frydman. Brill, 2023. 250 pages. ISBN: 9789004461284 (hardcover; also available as e-book).

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Since the 1960s, archaeologists in Japan have unearthed over 200,000 inscribed wooden tablets known as *mokkan* (p. 19). Historians typically examine these objects to gain insight into economic and political history, research that has revolutionized our understanding of seventh- and eighth-century Japan. A small subset of these tablets called *uta* (poem) *mokkan* speaks to the formation of Japanese literature. Joshua Frydman's exciting new monograph is the first book-length study in English to take up *uta mokkan*. It also delves into other objects inscribed with Japanese poetry and Chinese literary works. Through Frydman's research, readers learn how poetry circulated before its canonization and discover new ways to theorize literature in material form. This is a foundational study, one that will surely be the best book on Japanese excavated poetry for decades to come.

Frydman sets the stakes in the introduction. He argues that Japan can serve as a "test case" for conversations about the emergence of literacy and the relationship between technology and art on a global scale (p. 1). The rise of writing is especially well-documented in Japan, which makes it a comparatively illuminating case study of broad interest. In the introduction, Frydman also outlines a succinct history of Japan through the eighth century that will surely aid nonspecialist readers. Most crucially, he articulates his vision of the sixth through eighth centuries as a time of "rapid social, political, and technological change" (p. 11). Writing at this time "exploded" alongside the rise of a Chinese-style bureaucratic government and the spread of Buddhism (p. 12). According to Frydman, *mokkan*, including *uta mokkan*, contributed to and reflect the revolutionary character of the age.

Chapter 1 is a tour de force. It provides the most comprehensive English-language overview of *mokkan* and other nonpaper writing surfaces to date. *Mokkan* studies in Japan is a specialized field with a high bar for entry. Reading archaeological reports requires a mastery of arcane terminology and technical conventions. Frydman kindly outlines the basics of *mokkan* studies, patiently walking his reader through the history of the field, its vocabulary, and its methods. He arranges much of this information in easy-to-read tables, including one on the major categories of *mokkan* (p. 34) and another on the transcription system used by the Nara National

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Research Institute for Cultural Properties, the most important center for research on *mokkan* in Japan (pp. 37–38). The chapter includes representative examples of all the major types of *mokkan*, such as bureaucratic memoranda, taxation-related documents, and miscellanea. It provides a convenient introduction to scholarly conventions and surveys the tools necessary for research. The chapter ends with a short overview of lesser-known inscribed objects—for example, roof tiles, clay pottery, stone steles, metal Buddhist images, and lacquered documents (these were typically recycled paper lids for lacquer jars that absorbed the lacquer, inadvertently becoming durable in the process). Altogether, this chapter is a godsend that will save students from what would otherwise be a time-consuming and even painful struggle to master the often esoteric world of archaeological research in Japan. I wish it had been available when I was a graduate student.

Frydman spotlights *uta mokkan* in chapter 2. This chapter surveys the corpus and summarizes the key frameworks for researching poetry inscribed on wood as well as other surfaces. By the end of the chapter, readers have a sense of the key theories and methods for the study of *uta mokkan*. Altogether, the author lays the foundations for subsequent chapters, each of which takes up narrower cases, by arguing that (1) we must attend to the physical form of *mokkan*, (2) we must consider the context in which they circulated, and (3) we must remember that most of these objects were trash. These conclusions are central to *uta mokkan* studies, and each deserves a few sentences of summary.

First, Frydman stresses the need to evaluate the material qualities of *mokkan*, an argument famously articulated in Sakaehara Towao's groundbreaking scholarship on the relationship between *uta mokkan*'s form and function. As Frydman explains, Sakaehara divides *uta mokkan* into two main types. The first, A-type *mokkan*, are especially long—700 mm or more, about twice the size of the standard *mokkan* used for memoranda and taxation tags. The poems on these tablets are written in a single line of evenly spaced characters. Frydman, following Sakaehara, argues that A-type *mokkan* were likely used in public performances, either as performance aids for the reader who vocalized the text or as a form of display made visible to the audience. In contrast, B-type *mokkan* are smaller (closer to 300 mm) and feature multiple lines of graphs. B-type *mokkan*, according to Frydman, functioned similarly to "scrap paper or notepads today, for personal or compositional use" (p. 53). In short, both Sakaehara and Frydman argue that we can only understand the function of these objects by considering their form.

The next two arguments advanced in chapter 2 build upon Sakaehara's work but take it in new directions. Frydman's second main methodological contribution emphasizes that form alone is insufficient for understanding these objects; scholars must also situate them within their archaeological context. He makes the important observation that *uta mokkan* have been typically found at or near palaces and government offices, in both the capital and the provinces, as well as occasionally at Buddhist temples. Based on this context, he compellingly argues that

Japanese poetry circulated among government officials at "locations connected to the Imperial court and its bureaucracy" (p. 67).

Finally, he emphasizes that we have *uta mokkan* precisely because they were thrown away. *Mokkan*, including *uta mokkan*, typically come from trash heaps (other *mokkan* have been discovered in latrines, where they were split into chopstick-size pieces and used as fecal scrapers called *chūgi* [p. 25]). *Uta mokkan* were viewed as expendable. And since they were not intended to be preserved or canonized, their significance must be understood within the specific, evanescent context in which they were produced and disposed of. Putting this all together, Frydman concludes that poetry often circulated among officials at banquets and Buddhist ceremonies as an "informal and disposable . . . form of entertainment" (p. 88). It is possible to draw an even larger methodological conclusion from this work: Scholars need to attend to the materiality, performative context, and afterlives of texts. Poetry's meaning is inseparable from these three variables.

Chapter 3 and beyond use these insights to shed light on specific case studies centered on particular poems or texts. Frydman's third chapter looks at one of the most famous poems in Japanese history: the Naniwazu poem that Ki no Tsurayuki (872–945) viewed as a progenitor of all of Japanese poetry in his preface to the tenth-century anthology *Kokin wakashū*. Long before a Heian-period poet made this audacious claim about the origins of poetry, the Naniwazu poem had circulated widely on *mokkan* beginning in the seventh century. In fact, it was so popular that it appears on the majority of extant objects inscribed with poetry (p. 91). Oddly, the Naniwazu poem, which later gained almost mythical status, only circulated in ephemeral forms in the seventh and eighth centuries; it was not included in *Man'yōshū*, the main anthology of Japanese poetry from this era. Instead, inscriptions are found, usually as fragments, on objects unearthed throughout Japan—from Shikoku to Toyama—including twenty-two *mokkan*, eleven pottery shards, two roof tiles, and three examples on inner ceilings (p. 111). Why did this poem circulate so widely from such an early time? Why write poems that few, if any, could see?

For Frydman, the answer lies in the concept of "writing practice," an older model that he reinvigorates. Scholars typically gloss the type of poems found on Sakaehara's B-type *mokkan* as "idle jottings" (*rakugaki*) or "writing practice" (*shūsho*), a vague classification used for objects with no clear purpose beyond training in composition and calligraphy. Frydman expands on this notion substantially. For him, writing practice resembles a form of "ritualized writing" in which "the repeated writing out of the same characters or phrases . . . is . . . set apart from other forms of writing by explicitly not being used for communication" (p. 144). His evidence for this claim is strengthened by the example of an *uta mokkan* found among a variety of objects used for rituals tied to purification and possibly animal sacrifice. Using this example to conclude that inscribed poetry may hold ritual power more generally, Frydman proposes a new interpretation of the Naniwazu poem, which situates it within the court politics of Emperor Kōtoku (596–654; r. 645–654), who

ruled at Naniwa. Crucially for Frydman, new archaeological data from Kōtoku's Naniwa Palace shows that his court was far more innovative and influential than previously thought. The author argues that Kōtoku reigned over a period that witnessed reforms marking what some would later call a "Great Change" (Taika) and can, at the very least, be understood as a time of major transformation in society and governance. Given this historical context, Frydman proposes that the Naniwazu poem's repeated inscriptions ritually celebrated royal power. In his reading, these simple verses, "In Naniwa port / they bloom, these flowers! / Proclaiming it is now spring, / from within winter's toils, / they bloom, these flowers!," liken Kōtoku at Naniwa to spring flowers that symbolize a new age for the fledgling court (p. 106; the translation used by Frydman is David Lurie's). The poem, Frydman argues, functioned to repeatedly celebrate the power of Kōtoku, a meaning that possibly vanished in subsequent eras even as the poem continued to circulate. I should stress that although Frydman wisely stops short of fully accepting the historicity of the so-called Taika Reforms (Taika no kaishin), he still presents a provocative new assessment of Kōtoku's reign as transformative, a view that will force historians to reconsider standard narratives in the field. Like a suppressed memory, these poems buried underground remember a ruler whose importance had been forgotten, only to be recovered by modern doctors of philosophy. In other words, Frydman excavates a new interpretation of the poem's meaning in the seventh century, one that may have even been lost to the eighth-century officials who inscribed it on wood and tossed it in trash heaps.

Chapter 4 considers the differences between writing in Old Japanese and Literary Sinitic, the now-preferred term for what is often called classical Chinese. The relationship between Old Japanese and Literary Sinitic is a thorny problem. The distinctions are often fluid. Moreover, claims about either language are entangled with national pride and histories of imperialism. The corpus of Literary Sinitic works inscribed on *mokkan* is small; Frydman cites eleven examples of poetry and seventeen of prose that are listed in the Wooden Tablet Database of the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. As he shows, however, the very act of classifying a work as "Literary Sinitic" presents problems. For example, he looks at a well-known *mokkan* that records a passage from the *Analects*, an iconic work of Sinitic prose commonly taught in introductory classical Chinese courses to this day. The *mokkan* studied by Frydman reveals Japanese syntax and other idiosyncrasies inconsistent with our received version of the "Chinese" text. Taking inspiration from David Lurie, Frydman argues that these inconsistencies might not be mistakes but instead may point to intentional efforts "to reproduce [the text] so that other Japanese speakers could understand it" (p. 164).

After exploring these complex issues, the author raises this central question: How do Literary Sinitic and local vernaculars relate in early Japan? He notes how past scholars have answered this question by proposing oppositional, parallel, and interactive relationships. Adopting a comparative approach—with reference to

Tang China, South Asia, and imperial Rome—a methodological move to which I will return below, Frydman advances a more subtle position based on linguistic registers. He concludes that Japanese versus Literary Sinitic usage may have been tied to formal literary constraints rather than the politics of identity. The defining variable for what language to use often boiled down to what Frydman calls "situational context," or "what a given societal context requires" (p. 184). One method or style of inscription may have been chosen over another "not because one type of writing [was] inherently more valued, but because the specific function it [was] intended to perform require[d] a specific language" (p. 183). This conclusion is helpful because it moves beyond narratives of national identity and perceived hierarchies to less charged but more historically relevant discussions of genre conventions and social settings.

The elephant in the room for much of this book is *Man'yōshū*, the earliest and arguably most famous collection of Japanese poetry. Chapter 5 puts *uta mokkan* in dialogue with this anthology that has now become canon. The corpus of *uta mokkan* promises insight into how *Man'yōshū* came into being by revealing the ways some of its poems first circulated. Frydman identifies three objects, all *mokkan*, that contain poems directly related to *Man'yōshū*, though all are fragmentary and "we cannot be certain that any is identical to a *Man'yōshū* poem" (p. 198). He focuses especially on the Asakayama poem, which, unlike the Naniwazu poem, is preserved both in *Man'yōshū* and on *mokkan*. Ki no Tsurayuki called a variant of the Asakayama poem the other progenitor of poetry, alongside the Naniwazu text. In fact, the two works appear together on the same *mokkan*. Drawing upon the archaeological context from which the three *Man'yōshū*-related poems were uncovered, Frydman argues that poetry "circulated through informal channels during the century prior to [*Man'yōshū*'s] presumptive compilation . . . among royalty and the upper aristocracy" (p. 209). He highlights the importance of "court events"—banquets, salons, and other ceremonies—in which poetry was performed (p. 210). By evaluating the pre-anthologized circulation of poetry, Frydman is able to make an important point about *Man'yōshū* as a whole: It is the product of a relatively elite social culture. His recognition of this fundamental point changes the way we approach poems recorded in the collection, even those that do not appear on *mokkan*. He reminds us that even the poems supposedly capturing rural dialects and the language of commoners were still circulated, compiled, and perhaps even composed to suit the tastes of capital elites. While popular perception often treats this anthology as a window onto the common folk, Frydman's work alongside the research of Torquil Duthie teaches us that it is "yet another text that supports the early Japanese sociopolitical system" (p. 153). As such, it tends to privilege specific genres and modes of expression. Frydman's chapter, as well as his monograph as a whole, functions to "pull back the curtain on what the 'canon' of poetry from early Japan presents and what . . . has been left out" (p. 187). Part of the promise of inscribed poetry, Frydman reminds us, is the glimpse it offers into a world beyond what has been canonized.

But another benefit of these materials is that they help us "place boundaries" on *Man'yōshū* by clarifying its limited perspective (p. 212). In this way, they allow us to better understand poetry both within and outside of that anthology.

The final chapter, which functions as a conclusion, expands the conversation substantially, albeit briefly. This short chapter examines the significance of *mokkan* studies for the present day, an age characterized by a "new technological revolution" (p. 231). Here Frydman is interested in how *mokkan* might help us rethink writing in a digital era. He turns his comparative eye to a range of material including Japanese novels published in online forums and Hollywood films like the 2015 *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The theoretical topics he covers are vast and include (1) the difference between medium and method of delivery, (2) how new linguistic registers emerge and become standardized, (3) the disposability of both physical and digital media, and (4) the ways that works intended for a small audience can circulate widely, often aided by social networks. Along the way, we encounter several provocative terms from contemporary media theory such as "enregisterment" (p. 223) and "convergence" (p. 229). As a reader better versed in eighth-century Japanese society than in twenty-first-century digital culture and media studies, I would have benefited from more hand-holding to guide me through the nuance of some of Frydman's sophisticated arguments, which he articulates at a rapid pace. Still, his larger point is clear: Our current moment features a host of new technologies of writing; looking to the past can offer lessons for the present about how technological change, writing, and culture intersect.

Altogether this is an important book, a landmark study on a topic virtually unknown in Anglophone scholarship. Chapters 1 and 2 are must-reads for any scholar entering the arcane world of *mokkan* studies. Chapters 3 through 5 make important contributions to the fields of Japanese political history, linguistics, and literature. They significantly advance research on the Taika Reforms, the relationship between Japanese and Chinese language, and the compilation of *Man'yōshū*, all central topics in the study of early Japan.

The largest weakness of the book stems not from the shortcomings of the author but from the limits of the source material. Frydman is a careful scholar, always attentive to problems of interpretation based on a relatively small and deeply enigmatic corpus. As such, statements abound along the lines of "it is impossible to say . . ." (p. 56), "in the absence of records . . . we cannot determine . . ." (p. 134), "there are still no firm answers" (p. 208), and so on. Conclusions, it would seem, are hard to reach. Frydman does make a number of interventions in the field, which I have outlined above. However, it is clear that we will remain hindered by the small number of poetry inscriptions, which total "about forty in all" (p. 56; elsewhere described as "more than forty" [p. 72] and "approaching fifty" [p. 146]). While Frydman is surely right that *uta mokkan* can teach us about how eighth-century anthologies were compiled, the fact remains that there are just three objects with even fragments of *Man'yōshū* poems inscribed on them, about 0.067% of the entire

4,500-poem anthology. What conclusions can be drawn from such a small dataset? In some ways, the materials remain too mysterious, too elusive, and simply too few. I should stress that I am glad Frydman takes such care with his interpretations, and future scholars should follow his model of scholarly humility.

If anything, the quantitative limitations may have led Frydman to his most innovative and promising conclusion, one that I hope can be a model for future scholarship in the field. Precisely because there are so few sources, he turns to comparison throughout his study. While it might be difficult to understand what *mokkan* mean for Japanese history and literature, the author provocatively shows how, at the very least, we might learn more about *mokkan* and other cultures by comparing these objects with examples from diverse times and places. Chapter 3 takes up recent scholarship on graffiti in Pompeii and China. Chapter 4 looks at debates about vernacular and cosmopolitan languages globally. Chapter 6 compares twentieth and twenty-first-century writing with premodern materials. In other words, three of the chapters propose a comparative method, one that has been all too infrequently used for the study of early Japan.

This method, I would like to suggest, could help revitalize our field. In an age with justified anxiety over the death of premodern Japanese studies, we need to make our work intelligible and of interest to scholars outside of Asian studies. One way to do this is through comparative methods that engage the research of classicists, media studies scholars, and historical linguists, to name a few. This does not mean adopting theories from another field and applying them to the Japanese case. Rather, it requires a mutually informative project in which materials from each context are taken up to shed light on the other. This type of comparative work, which Frydman excels at, can make our research more relevant to our colleagues and can help us break free from some of the approaches and frameworks that have come to define and limit our research questions.

As scholars delve into these comparative methods, however, they will be confronted with several methodological and theoretical questions that Frydman's book helpfully raises, sometimes implicitly. What makes an appropriate comparison? What types of comparisons are useful? Should we compare Japanese materials with premodern inscribed ostraca from Pompeii or twenty-first-century bondage erotica like *Fifty Shades of Grey*? On what grounds can we even decide? As scholarship on early Japan moves forward and learns to speak to larger issues in the humanities—a project we must engage in if we want the field to survive—we will need to learn to better answer these types of questions about comparative theory and method. Thankfully, Frydman has opened the door for these ambitious conversations with his methodologically provocative first book. I enthusiastically recommend it to researchers of early Japan in all fields and to scholars of Japanese literature working on any period. I hope it will find an active readership among classicists, people interested in the materiality of writing, and those working on questions of vernacular and literary languages from a global perspective.