

## ■ News

### Japan's oldest votive tablets showing monkey leading a horse, and a cow are unearthed

On May 23 the Okayama University Archaeological Research Center announced the discovery of the two oldest votive tablets in Japan, dating back to the second half of the eighth century (Nara period). Unearthed at the Shikata site, the 'Ushi' tablet depicts a cow, while the 'Sarukomahiki' piece shows a monkey leading a horse.

The tablet of the monkey leading a horse is rectangular measuring 23cm x 12cm. The leftward facing horse is drawn with a flowing line from head to tail, and carries a saddle and stirrups. The monkey leading the horse has a rounded back and is quite small. From ancient times in Japan, monkeys have been thought to look after horses. Notably, the oldest example to date of such a scene was a late 13th century sketch.

This is the first unearthing of votive tablets showing monkey leading a horse in Japan, and raises the possibility of a relationship between monkeys and horses stretching back to the Nara era.



The votive tablet of the cow



Reconstructed drawing from the votive tablet of the cow



The votive tablet of the monkey leading the horse



Reconstructed drawing from the votive tablet of the monkey leading the horse

The tablet of the cow is also rectangular measuring 21.5cm x 12.3cm. The body is drawn in detail, including its hooves, and is shown with a sash. Three other votive tablets of cows, including one votive tablet possibility of the cow, exist in Japan, but this one discovered by scientists at Okayama University is the oldest.

From ancient times, votive tablets—known as 'ema' in Japanese—have been dedicated at shrines and appear in scrolls from the Heian era. The researchers hope that the votive tablets found at Okayama University will shed light on the hopes, beliefs and customs of people in the Nara period of Japanese history.

#### Further information

Okayama University Archaeological Research Center

<http://www.okayama-u.ac.jp/user/arc/archome.html>