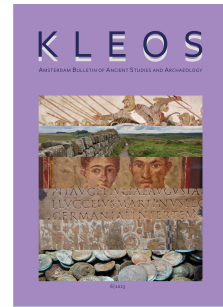




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# Investigating the Identity of Mezurashizuka Decorated Tomb's Painting: Introducing a New Perspective

Claudia Zancan

## ABSTRACT

Images in non-literate societies are important means of conveying information about cultural and social aspects of the time. The decorated tomb of Mezurashizuka 珍敷塚古墳 (6<sup>th</sup> century CE) is located in today's Fukuoka Prefecture, north of the island of Kyūshū, Japan, and will be the case study of this paper. This tomb is considered to be among the few decorated tombs in Kyūshū influenced by the iconography and iconology of the mainland China. However, the style and most of the elements depicted are of local origin. The painting, therefore, cannot be considered either totally local or entirely influenced by Korean Peninsular culture. What cultural and social information does the Mezurashizuka painting convey? The aim of this paper is to approach the study of this famous *sōshoku kofun* 装飾古墳 (decorated tombs) by considering it as a further element born of centuries of relations and interactions between North Kyūshū and the continent, specifically with the Korean Peninsula. Based on the discussed data, it will be demonstrated how this painting, and more generally the decorated tombs of northern Kyūshū, are the materialisation of cultural and social aspects of interactions in the Yellow Sea, and from centuries of hybridisation with Peninsular material culture. The decorated tombs are a symbol of a local power that did not fully identify with either the central power or the peninsular culture.

## INTRODUCTION

The term *sōshoku kofun* 装飾古墳 refers to ancient Japanese tombs with decorations. These tombs appeared during the Late Kofun Period (475–710 CE) on the northern Kyūshū island, Japan (figure 1), and then spread throughout the Japanese archipelago, to disappear around the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>1</sup> The peculiarity

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► [Profile page](#)

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, BCE (before common era)/CE (common era) are used for dating instead of BC/AD to not refer to Japan and Asia with a generally Eurocentric worldview, but with a more inclusive one. For a better understanding of the chronology of ancient Japan, see figure 2.



**Figure 1.**  
*Map of the main four Japanese islands (created by author).*

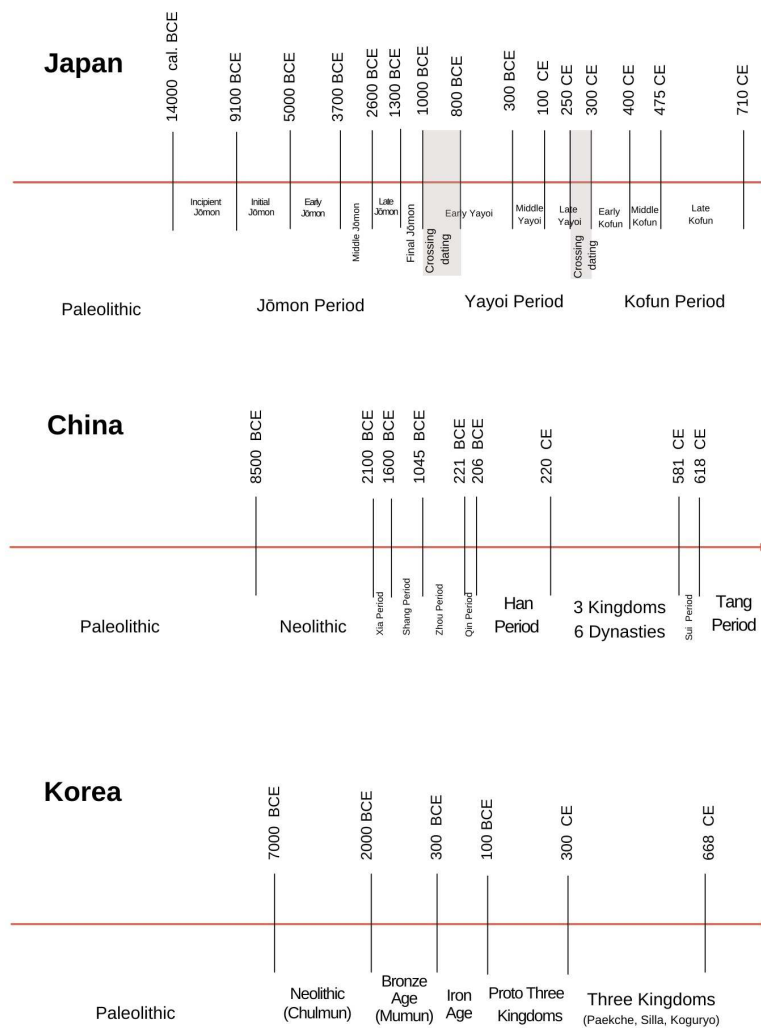
of this phenomenon is that it occurred only in the last phase of the Kofun Period and only in specific areas. The wall paintings of these decorated tombs can add a further important piece to the culture of the island of Kyūshū and the prehistoric art of Japan.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, images and symbols in non-literate societies — such as the Kofun period — convey important information about identity, society, and shared cultural aspects.<sup>3</sup> In particular in the context of funerary art, the subjects painted on the walls assume an important significance both for the deceased and for the society of the living, as they can be a means of communication for negotiating identity or for representing cults and beliefs of the time. Style, being a valuable element for analysing continuity and discontinuity in the archaeological record and for understanding both spatial and temporal distribution, can be fundamental in assessing possible cultural practices.<sup>4</sup> A variation or choice of a particular style can be linked to the transmission of specific information about identity or a change in the society and/or culture, in which it emerged. Symbols can be a materialised form of ideologies and, with proper reading and interpretation, it is

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, 'culture' means all the elements shared by a community, not only the tangible elements, but also the intangible aspects that are well recognised by the members of the community and those, who feel they belong to it (Ingold 1994, 329). It is the context, in which meanings are created and exchanged in the form of images, symbols and language, that must be correctly decoded in order to be understood and exchanged (Hall 1997, 2).

<sup>3</sup> DeMarrais et al. 1996, 16; Renfrew 2001, 131; Shelach 2009, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Barnes 1992, 2; Hays 1993, 88; Sanz/Fiore 2014, 7104.



**Figure 2.**  
Timeline of ancient Japan, China, and Korea (created by author).

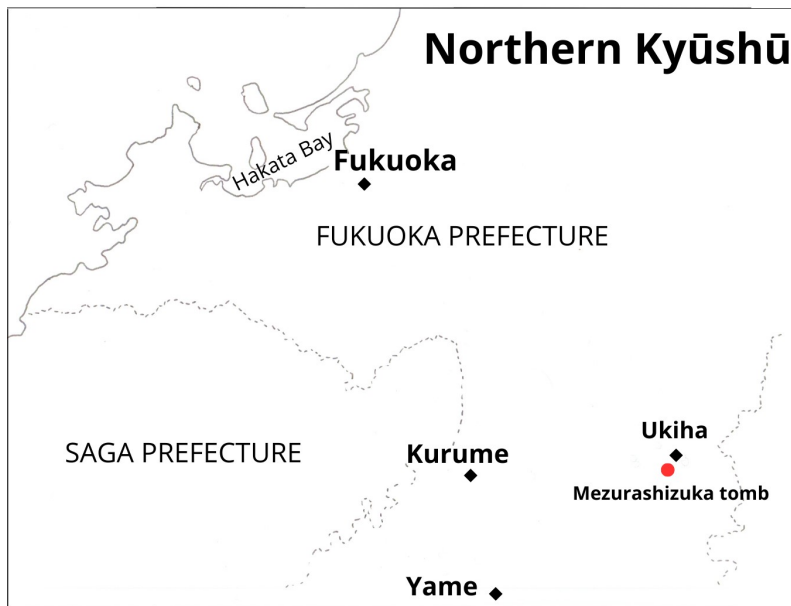
possible to recognise a specific identity affiliation associated with them.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the Kyūshū *sōshoku kofun* is an interesting case study for understanding how a non-literate society may have transmitted certain social and cultural information through the creation of decorative motifs.

In this paper, a study regarding the social and cultural information conveyed by the *sōshoku kofun* is presented, focusing on a specific decorated tomb, namely the tomb of Mezurashizuka 珍敷塚古墳, located near Ukiha (Fukuoka Prefecture) (figure 3) and dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Studies of this tomb have placed it among the decorated tombs with explicit continental influences on the iconography and iconology depicted.<sup>6</sup> The main questions posed are to understand to what extent we can identify peninsular influence on the style, the iconography and on interpreting the

<sup>5</sup> DeMarrais et al. 1996, 16–17; Conkey 2006, 357–360; Shelach 2009, 78.

<sup>6</sup> See Shiraishi 1999; Yanagisawa 2022; Kawano 2023.





**Figure 3.**  
Map of the Mezurashizuka tomb's location (created by author).

iconology, and how to explain the presence of both local and Peninsular subjects in the Mezurashizuka paintings. By answering these, this study aims to add new information to the debate on the symbolism and identity represented by the *sōshoku kofun*, focusing on an approach that has never been considered in studies on the subject to date: to not regard the nature of this tomb as totally local or totally influenced by the Peninsula, but as something in between. Indeed, the archaeological context of Kyūshū shows various aspects of material culture, in which local elements were intertwined with peninsular ones to create a new material culture. In contemporary studies on the theme, the decorated tombs of northern Kyūshū are regarded as a local artistic development, in which there was only minimal influence from an iconographic point of view from the tradition of peninsular decorated tombs. Is this really the case, or is there something more?

The archaeological context, in which the *sōshoku kofun* and, therefore, also the tomb of Mezurashizuka, originated will first be briefly presented, emphasising the importance of the interactions between North Kyūshū and the Peninsular cultures. The information presented here will underline how for centuries the society of North Kyūshū was used to interact with a material culture that was not entirely local, but 'mixed'. The mortuary system in-use in the Late Kofun and the perception of the deceased at that time will then be introduced in order to understand how burial was perceived during the period of interest for this research. The main characteristics of the *sōshoku kofun* of Northern Kyūshū will be briefly introduced and the painting of the tomb of Mezurashizuka will be analysed. The information gathered will be discussed to be able to understand the social and

cultural information conveyed by this decorated tomb.

The method of this research is based on a discussion of current studies of the subject, together with data obtained from personal iconographic and iconological analysis of the painting based on E. Panofsky's method of analysis.<sup>7</sup> In addition, data for comparison with other decorated tombs and the broader context of the *sōshoku kofun* phenomenon are obtained from personal databases.<sup>8</sup>

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF NORTH KYŪSHŪ

For the correct interpretation of the images in the wall paintings of the *sōshoku kofun* of Mezurashizuka, it is necessary to outline the socio-cultural context in which this exchange of meanings occurred.<sup>9</sup>

### *THE INTERACTIONS WITH THE KOREAN PENINSULA DURING JŌMON (C. 14,500–1000 BCE) AND YAYOI (900 OR 400 BCE – 250 CE) PERIODS*

Several studies on the relations between North Kyūshū and the Korean Peninsula since the Jōmon Period have shown that there was direct contact between the peoples of the two regions as well as exchange and influence on some of the material culture produced by both.<sup>10</sup> Although these contacts did not always lead to the creation of a new interwoven material culture, they reveal a familiarity of Northern Kyūshū people with Peninsular art, and symbolism. Table 1 shows some of the most significant evidence of contact and hybridisation in the material culture of Northern Kyūshū during the Jōmon and Yayoi Periods.<sup>11</sup>

### *THE KOFUN PERIOD (250 OR 300 CE – 710 CE)*

The Kofun Period is characterised by specific socio-political

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7 Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) was an art historian who developed a method of analysis known as iconography and iconology. His approach aimed to unravel the multiple layers of meaning present in works of art. Panofsky's method goes beyond the traditional formal analysis of art and delves into the symbolism, cultural references, and historical context of a given artwork. Iconography refers to the identification and interpretation of visual symbols, motifs, and subject matter within a work of art. Iconology, on the other hand, encompasses a broader investigation into the underlying cultural and intellectual frameworks that shape an artwork. See Panofsky 1972.

8 These databases are compiled by analysing material received from Dr. Kawano Kazutaka and Prof. Maria Shinoto through private correspondence.

9 From an archaeological point of view, Japan is considered 'prehistoric' from the Jōmon Period to the Middle Yayoi, and 'protohistoric' from the Middle Yayoi to the last phase of the Kofun Period.

10 See Miyamoto 2008; Mizoguchi 2013; Barnes 2015; Bausch 2016; Hudson et al. 2021 for studies on the topic.

11 For more information on the Jōmon - Peninsula interactions see: Miyamoto 2008; Shin et al. 2012; Bausch 2016; Lee 2016; Hudson et al. 2021; Nishitani 2020. For more information on the Yayoi - Peninsula interactions see: Barnes 2001a, 2015; Seyock 2003; Rhee et al. 2007; Hashino 2011; Kawakami 2011; Mizoguchi 2013.

PERIOD	CONTACT EVIDENCES	SITE
Early Jōmon	Fragments of Peninsular Chulmun pottery; obsidian flakes and arrowheads; sherds of Peninsular Early Yunggimun pottery	Koshidaka 越高 Koshidaka-Ozaki 越高尾崎 (Tsushima Island)
Early Jōmon	Chulmun stylistic influence on Early Jōmon terracotta indicating a mobility and/or intermarriage: direct contact between potters	North Kyūshū
Middle Jōmon	Chulmun pottery sherds; obsidian arrowheads; cores and flakes	Myōtoishi 夫婦石 (Tsushima Island)
End of Middle Jōmon and the beginning of Late Jōmon	Late Neolithic Peninsular pottery	Yoshida 吉田 Nukashi ヌカシ (Tsushima Island)
End of Middle Jōmon and the beginning of Late Jōmon	Chulmun pottery in a private dwelling	Late Jōmon settlement of Saga shell midden
Last phase of the final Jōmon	Peninsular Mumun red burnished pottery; stone and bronze "Liaoning" daggers; spindle whorls and loom technology; agricultural innovations (rice, barley, wheat, millet)	North Kyūshū
Early Yayoi	The earliest Yayoi pottery would seem to derive from the hybridisation of Mumun and local pottery from the Final Jōmon phase	North Kyūshū
Middle Yayoi	Yayoi Jonokoshi pottery began to be hybridised from Mumun pottery by Peninsular inhabitants of settlements in the Saga Plain	North Kyūshū
Middle Yayoi	Hybridisation in buildings: they were built according to the Peninsular tradition of the Songguk'ni type (two roof supporting posts close to a central depression), while the layout was typical local	village of Etsuji 江辻遺跡 (Fukuoka Prefecture)
Middle Yayoi	Iron tools and cereals (such as wheat and rice) were traded; Samhan and Lelang pottery fragments	Haru-no-Tsuji 原ノ辻 Karakami カラカミ (Iki Island)
Middle - Late Yayoi	'competitive emulation' of symbolic objects found within grave goods: swords, beads, horse harness, bronze mirrors	North Kyūshū

**Table 1.**

*Evidence of interactions between Northern Kyūshū and Peninsular Populations based on the material culture of Kyūshū during the Jōmon and Yayoi Periods (created by author).*

developments, that led to the formation of the Japanese state, and is normally divided into three sub-phases: Early (250–400 CE), Middle (400–475 CE) and Late (475–710 CE)<sup>12</sup>. The division of these subphases is mainly based on the development of the structure of the typical tombs of this period — the *kofun* 古墳— and in the repertoire of funerary objects. It is also closely connected with the socio-political changes, that happened in the Japanese archipelago during that time.<sup>13</sup> The process for the emergence of this complex society had already begun during the previous period, the Yayoi Period (900 or 400 BCE – 250 CE), due to the political and economic interactions, that took place in the Yellow Sea through the island of Kyūshū. From the Middle Yayoi until 500 CE, these interactions were frequent and had a major impact on the material culture and the emerging Japanese identity.<sup>14</sup> The interactions that occurred in the Yellow Sea sphere can be subdivided according to their nature as follows: with Han China, Kyūshū had a subordinate relationship based on the tributary system; while with the southern part of Korea, it was a relationship between peers.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen archaeologically from the funerary material culture, that resulted from these interactions. For instance, objects of the comparative artefact repertoires of burials in the southern Korean Peninsula (Proto-Three Kingdoms) and North Kyūshū during the Middle-Late Yayoi Period include: local ceramics (Wajil pottery in Southern Korea; Yayoi Pottery in North Kyūshū); non-local ceramics (Yayoi pottery in Southern Korea; Wajil and Mumun pottery in North Kyūshū); Chinese-style iron arrowheads (in both Southern Korea and North Kyūshū), Han mirrors (both in Southern Korea and North Kyūshū) and Chinese-style horse and carriage fixtures (both in Southern Korean and North Kyūshū).<sup>16</sup> The sharing and exchange of these objects, first with the mainland and then among the Yayoi chieftains, triggered the process of the creation of a stratified and complex society: the person who received one of these objects was considered as belonging to a certain social class directly connected with the elite and power, creating thus a distinction within the various clans of the Japanese territory.<sup>17</sup>

The process of Japanese state formation continued throughout the Kofun Period (250 or 300 CE – 710 CE) and is materially visible through the development of a specific mortuary system: the *kofun*

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<sup>12</sup> Barnes 2007, 9; Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 168.

<sup>13</sup> The word '*kofun*' means 'old mound, ancient tomb' Tsude 1987, 55; Barnes 2007, 9; Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the impact on material culture, see Barnes 2007; Mizoguchi 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes 2007, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Seyock 2003, 72–73; Barnes 2007, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 241.

tombs.<sup>18</sup> The development of the size of the tombs coincides with the Yamato clan's rise to power in the Nara Basin (Honshū) (figure 2). Indeed, when the Yamato clan imposed its supremacy and recognition as the ruling clan in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, the size of the *kofun* reached its peak, while in the Late Period the *kofun* became smaller and simpler as the supremacy of this clan was now recognised by the other clans, and because temple-building overtook tomb-building as an elite endeavour.<sup>19</sup> Late Kofun tombs were no longer reserved only for local leaders, but common people also began to build their own tombs, and they spread throughout Japan, including Kyūshū.<sup>20</sup>

The symbolic objects created during the period of lively exchange with the mainland continued to represent membership of a specific social status and became the characteristic objects of the grave goods typical of the tombs of the most important chieftains.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, a part of the material culture of the time was made up of objects brought in from a foreign culture into Kyūshū society and absorbed and used as if they were local.

#### *NORTHERN KYŪSHŪ - PENINSULAR RELATIONS DURING THE KOFUN PERIOD*

During the Kofun Period, archipelago communities, especially those in Northern Kyūshū and Western Japan, were called into the inter-polity conflicts of the Korean Peninsula (Three Kingdoms Period, 330–668 CE) and came into direct contact with peninsular communities (figure 4).<sup>22</sup> There was a real migratory flow from the Peninsula (especially from the Kingdom of Paekche and Kaya) to the islands of the archipelago. Again, along with people, ideas, cultural and technological aspects also entered.<sup>23</sup> Although Northern Kyūshū had been the bridge of contact between the two areas for centuries, during the Kofun Period it was mainly the Nara Basin area that monopolised contacts with China and the Korean

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<sup>18</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Tsude 1987, 55.

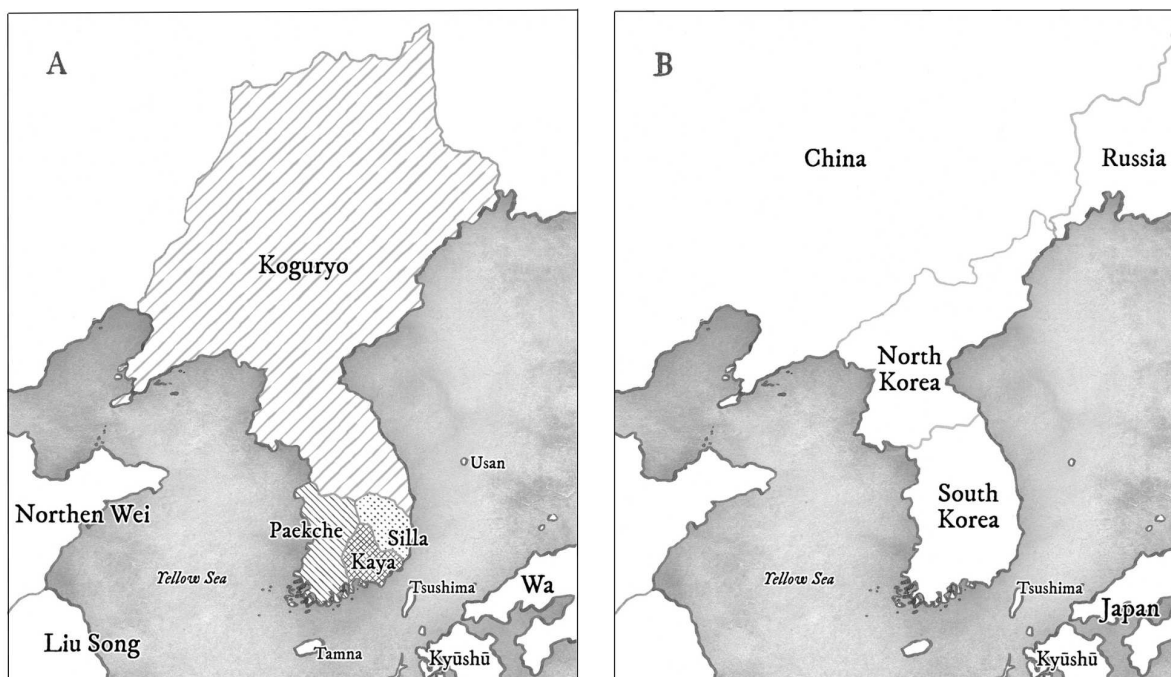
<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Barnes 2015, 67–78.

<sup>22</sup> For more information about the inter-polity conflicts of the Korean Peninsula and the role of Northern Kyūshū and Western Japan, see Farris 1998; Barnes 2001a, 2007, 2015; Rhee et al. 2007, 2021; Mizoguchi 2013; Steinhaus-Kaner 2016.

In the wars of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE among the Korean kingdoms of Koguryo, Silla and Paekche, the Yamato kingdom allied with Paekche against Silla by sending several troops from the coast of North Kyūshū (Brown 1993, 140–144).

<sup>23</sup> Regarding interactions during this period, see Farris 1998; Barnes 2007; Mizoguchi 2013. In his study, Farris (1998) compiles a list of the new cultural elements that appeared in Japan during the Kofun Period including iron-working technology and products (swords, spear points, arrowheads, iron armour and helmets, horse trappings, hoes, spades, sickles); dam-building technology and stamped earth construction techniques; wheel-thrown, high-fired stoneware ceramics; aristocratic gold and silver accoutrements; silk weaving; a complex system of writing; methods of statecraft; a court ranking system; systematic units of measurement; Buddhist religion (Farris 1998, 68–69).



**Figure 4.** *Map of the Yellow Sea. (A) Ancient view, showing the interaction sphere during the Kofun Period (6<sup>th</sup> century CE): China with the Northern Wei and Liu Song dynasties, Korea during the Three Kingdoms period with the Kingdom of Koguryo, Paekche, Silla and Kaya showing the maximum Koguryo expansion in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and Japan (called 'Wa' at that time); (B) Modern view (drawing by Mariapia Di Lecce, architect and illustrator).*

Peninsula: the Yamato elite wanted to reach out to the mainland to obtain the same symbols and means of power.<sup>24</sup> However, residential-farming-manufacturing-ritual complexes were activated in Northern Kyūshū by the peninsular migration flow.<sup>25</sup> Hakata Bay (is a bay in the north-western part of today's Fukuoka city) became one of the most important hubs for shipping iron from the Peninsula: the competition for bronze and iron to forge symbolic military-type objects (such as horse trappings, armour and helmets) found in the funerary context demonstrates a shift from religious to military power.<sup>26</sup> During the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, goods and techniques from Japan entered the Korean Peninsula, in Kaya, at the archaeological site of the Jinsan-dong (Goryeong) royal tombs group. Although the quantity of Japanese items found in the Peninsula is not as impressive as that of the artefacts found in Japan with a Korean origin, there is archaeological evidence for a vivid trade during the Kofun Period.<sup>27</sup> In conclusion, Kyūshū maintained strong ties with the Peninsula at this stage, continuing a peaceful coexistence between the local population and the peninsular immigrants, who had arrived there because of the unstable situation in their territory.

#### *THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF NORTHERN KYŪSHŪ DURING THE LATE KOFUN PERIOD*

According to the later Japanese historical source of *Nihon Shoki* 日

<sup>24</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Rhee et al. 2007; Barnes 2015; Steinhaus/Kaner 2016; Nishitani 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Farris 1998, 108.

本書紀 (720 CE), Kyūshū was dominated by three different clans during the Late Kofun Period.<sup>28</sup> For the discussion points of this paper, only the main information for the clan of Tsukushi, that is assumed to have ruled the area of the Mezurashizuka tomb, will be outlined. This clan ruled the central area situated between Tsukushi and Kyūshū mountains ranges. It is said that under the reign of Keitai, a clan leader from this area, whose name is thought to be Iwai 磐井, refused the orders of Yamato to send troops and supplies for an expedition against the Korean Kingdom of Silla.<sup>29</sup> According to the *Nihon Shoki*, Iwai had made a deal with Silla, thus Yamato's troops were sent to put the Kyūshū rebellion down.<sup>30</sup> Although Iwai was defeated, this event shows that in Kyūshū there was a strong clan, that was also very close to the Peninsula. Related to the rebellion of Iwai are the stone sculptures known as *sekijinsekiba* 石人石馬. These are stone sculptures made out of lava tuff depicting men, horses, weapons and armour, and were arranged around the perimeter of the burial ground, replacing the *haniwa* 埴輪 (terracotta clay figures).<sup>31</sup> The *sekijinsekiba* were considered the symbol of this rebellion and used in the burials of the various members of the Iwai clan and the areas of its influence.<sup>32</sup> A theory formulated in 1974 by Oda Fujio states, that after the Iwai revolt *sekijinsekiba* would be replaced by paintings and decorations inside tombs as a manifestation of a local culture, that wanted to differentiate itself from the central Yamato culture.<sup>33</sup>

### THE MORTUARY SYSTEM OF THE LATE KOFUN PERIOD IN KYŪSHŪ

A new important feature of mortuary architecture entered in Northern Kyūshū during the Late Kofun Period: the *yokoanashiki sekishitsu* 横穴式石室 (corridor-style stone burial chamber, figure 5). The construction of the gallery mortuary chamber within the

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28 The northern zone, facing the Genkai Sea and bounded in the centre by the mountain range of Tsukushi, was dominated by the Munaka clan; the central area was under the Tsukushi clan; and the southern side of Kyūshū was occupied by the Kumaso and Hayato peoples (Brown 1993, 149).

29 Brown 1993, 149; Kawano 2023, 78–101. The chapter of the *Nihon Shoki* referred to is 'Book XVII - Keidai Tenno'. For an English translation see Aston 1896.

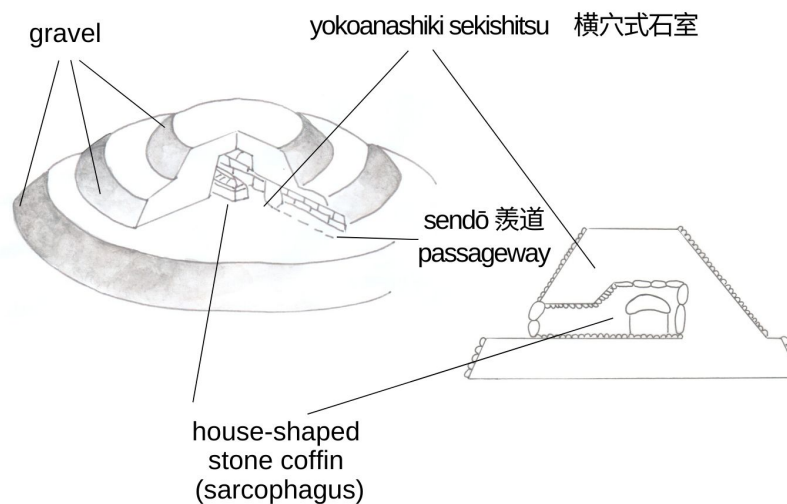
30 Brown 1993, 149. According to Kawano (2023), Iwai would have moved against Yamato's central power due to local dissatisfaction with the excessive weight of military forces required for the war on the Korean Peninsula. He would have been the spokesman for the situation North Kyūshū was experiencing (Kawano 2023, 78–82).

31 Brown 1993, 149–152; Ikeuchi 2015, 16–18; Nishitani 2020, 130–131; Kawano 2021, 240. The term 'haniwa' refers to terracotta clay figures, that were made for ritual use. They were placed on the perimeter of the *kofun* tomb. Their purpose was twofold: to separate the world of the dead from the world of the living and to protect the dead by ensuring peace for their spirits (Vesco 2021, 27).

32 Ikeuchi 2015, 16–17; Kawano 2023, 78–101.

33 See Oda 1974.





**Figure 5.**

Structure of a yokoanashiki sekishitsu inside a kofun tomb in the enpun (round) shape. The earthen mound tiers are faced or paved with river cobbles (adapted from Yamakawa 2021, 25).

*kofun* tomb already existed since the Early Kofun Period.<sup>34</sup> It is a cist-like chamber with a rectangular pit-like entrance; the bottom of the entranceway, which is dug into the constructed mound, is level with the mouth of the entrance pit and it could be reopened.<sup>35</sup> This typology may have appeared from the hybridisation of the traditional cist chamber and the peninsular tradition of reopening chambers to bury additional deceased. Another possibility is, that it originated from the gallery chamber type developed in the Korean Paekche kingdom.<sup>36</sup> Then it evolved between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE into the *yokoanashiki sekishitsu*, a tomb with an entrance on one wall of the stone chamber leading outside and with a passageway to the chamber, where the deceased was laid to rest. Therefore, the entrance to the tomb and the various chambers is lateral: narrow corridors leading to large interior spaces, that allow for the burial of multiple people, probably members of the same household (figure 6).<sup>37</sup> This is the main layout of decorated tombs in Northern Kyūshū.

In the *yokoanashiki sekishitsu*, the burial rituals were performed at the entrance and inside the tomb during the Late Kofun Period and no longer at the top as in the first two phases of the Period, since the burial entrance is on the side now.<sup>38</sup> The entrance to the burial area, no longer sealed, gave the opportunity to reopen the tomb.<sup>39</sup> These ceremonies likely have had a different function from the first rites in honour of the deceased, since, starting from the Late Kofun, the shape of the tombs was no longer a symbol-

<sup>34</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 256–258; Barnes 2015, 355–356.

<sup>35</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 256.

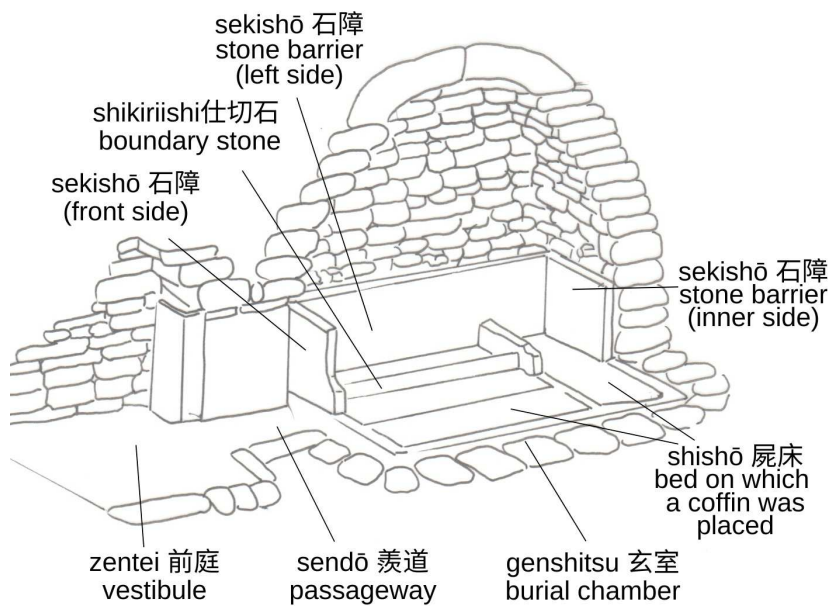
<sup>36</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 256–258; Barnes 2015, 355–356.

<sup>37</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 309.

<sup>39</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 169.





**Figure 6.**

Interior layout of a yokoanashiki sekishitsu with sekishō (adapted from Yanagisawa 2022, figure 2, 16).

microcosm of the values represented by the buried person and a place for offerings and prayers, but became "the monumental indicator of the status of the deceased".<sup>40</sup> Moreover, "not only the members of a sub-lineage-scale grouping were buried, but also individuals who had done and achieved certain things in their lifetime [...]"<sup>41</sup>

It also seems that in the *sōshoku kofun* of Kyūshū, there was a specific burial practice that can be related to the presence of the depicted murals. In fact, it is believed the deceased was 'shown' to the community inside the burial chamber.<sup>42</sup> It is assumed, that the original use of decorated *kofun* was to allow the mourner and the deceased to meet in the front room through the mural.<sup>43</sup> Wada affirms in that time it is believed, that the deceased, or its soul, was free to move within this space, so that they could interact with the motifs reproduced on the walls and observe the decorations, which were familiar and easy to decode.<sup>44</sup> The deceased, who was shown to third parties, had to be contained so that they did not venture out of the house of the dead.<sup>45</sup> For this reason, there are certain symbols — such as the *chokkomon* 直弧文 (straight line and arc

<sup>40</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 309.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>42</sup> According to Kawano, the deceased was placed along the wall at the back, thus visible from the entrance, because the perspective allowed one to see the burial chamber and the deceased (placed in a sarcophagus, coffin or lying in the *shishō*) directly as one entered the tomb. Still, according to the author, the decorations on the walls would have had the meaning of 'decorating and embellishing' the deceased, and all decorated tombs in themselves were meant to stage this representation for the living, who would return to the tombs for the burials of the other members of the lineage (Kawano 2023, 104–114).

<sup>43</sup> Kawano 2021, 241.

<sup>44</sup> Wada 2009, 264.

<sup>45</sup> Kawano 2021, 244.

pattern) — in decorated tombs, that were believed to be talismans to contain the soul of the deceased.<sup>46</sup>

Lastly, the related symbolism of the material culture created through interactions in the Yellow Sea, that began from the Middle Yayoi, was manifested in the grave goods, which, in some cases, have unique local characteristics. The main grave goods of the Late Kofun are briefly illustrated in table 2 with a focus on the specificities found on the island of Kyūshū.

## THE SŌSHOKU KOFUN OF NORTHERN KYŪSHŪ

The term *sōshoku kofun* refers to those *kofun* with decorative motifs in relief, engraved and painted on the inner and/or outer surface of the sarcophagus, on the surface of the *sekishō* 石障, on the inner and/or outer walls of the stone burial chamber.<sup>47</sup> The *sōshoku kofun* are normally divided into four types depending on where the decorations were placed and made, as shown in table 3.<sup>48</sup>

The origin of *sōshoku kofun* is still unknown. One theory identifies the origin of the phenomenon in the influence from the mainland and, in particular, with the Korean kingdom of Koguryo. The contact with the culture of decorated tombs of this kingdom would have activated a kind of stimulus to emulate them and absorb some symbolic elements connected with the conception of the afterlife.<sup>49</sup> The other main theory, also outlined in the previous section, is the local development of a new artistic phenomenon (first with *sekijinsekiba*, later with decorations in tombs) resulting from a materialisation of the local ideology, that opposed the central power with the Iwai revolt.<sup>50</sup>

In all cases, *sōshoku kofun* were probably related to the burial of people of a specific social status or members of a specific powerful family line.<sup>51</sup> This is so, because the making of the paintings required a specific labour force. According to Barnes, the construction of the tomb was in itself perceived as a sufficient

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<sup>46</sup> The term '*chokkomon*' refers to patterns of straight lines and arcs. It is believed that this motif was used in the funerary context as it was intended to protect the soul of the deceased and is also found drawn on *haniwa* clay figurines (Shiraishi 1999, 76). However, Barnes argues that this symbol, which is also found on various objects of material culture not always related to the funerary context, had the meaning of "either to help inflict death or to ward off death from its user" (Barnes 2003, 64).

<sup>47</sup> The term '*sekishō*' refers to the surfaces of the walls of the burial chamber, that were covered with stone slabs in some specific graves (Shiraishi 1993, 11).

<sup>48</sup> Professor Y. Kobayashi was the first to suggest this division in the 1960s, and is still the most commonly used division to categorise the different types of decorated tombs (see Kobayashi 1961; Shiraishi 1993, 11–12; Ikeuchi 2015, 12–13).

<sup>49</sup> Shiraishi 1993, 15; 1999, 74, 86.

<sup>50</sup> According to Yanagisawa, the decorated tombs could be a symbol of the federation of clans, that supported Iwai against Yamato (Yanagisawa 2022, 54–55).

<sup>51</sup> Ōtsuka 2014, 28.

LATE KOFUN PERIOD GRAVE GOODS	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Weapons and equipment for horse harnesses	<p>In the Late Kofun, unlike in the early stages, weapons were no longer placed in large numbers in mounds.<sup>1</sup> From the Middle Yayoi onwards, armour, arrowheads, equipment for harnessing horses, and especially swords, were considered among the most significant symbolic objects because they were connected with the symbolism of identity affiliation born with peer relationships. Weapons as a symbolic object did not disappear entirely from the Late Kofun grave goods: the different lengths and features on the handles of swords were typical indicators of minor differences in status.<sup>2</sup> The horse harnesses found in Late Kofun burials, and also in <i>sōshoku kofun</i> such as the tomb of Ōzuka, do not differ much from the same objects of the earlier phases and were probably imported or made on Korean models.<sup>3</sup> By the Middle Kofun, it was already common to breed and ride horses and gilded bronze trappings typical of the later phase began to be introduced from Korea.<sup>4</sup></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 308.  <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 309.  <sup>3</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 219.  <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 203.</p>
Bronze mirrors	<p>The bronze mirror has long been a symbolic object representing the recognition and affiliation to a particular political status of a specific elite in charge of relations with the Chinese court during the Yayoi Period. Mirrors were given by the Han court to regional Kyūshū chiefs to show and seal their alliance relationship.<sup>1</sup> The status symbolised by the mirror was also intrinsic to Yayoi and Kofun society: it was in fact used by Japanese society as a symbol of alliance with the future dominant Yamato clan in the transitional period between the Yayoi and Early/Middle Kofun Periods.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, those who obtained a bronze mirror from the Han court were also recognised by Yayoi society as members of the elite. In several graves of the first two Kofun phases, Chinese-made mirrors can be found dated even 200 years before the burial in question, symbolising that mirrors were kept for generations before being buried.<sup>3</sup> From the Middle Kofun onwards, there was then an increase in the local production of Japanese mirrors, but they were less well cared for and smaller than the Chinese originals.<sup>4</sup> While during Late Kofun there was also a return to the production of larger mirrors.<sup>5</sup> It is believed that the mirrors were placed inside the burial as they were considered magical objects, probably a Taoist belief.<sup>6</sup></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Barnes 2007.  <sup>2</sup> Kidder 1964, 142.  <sup>3</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 185.  <sup>4</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 185; Barnes 2015, 329.  <sup>5</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 240.  <sup>6</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 185; Kidder 1964, 142.</p>
Bead accessories and jewellery	<p>From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE onwards, the leaders of the rising society began to be buried together with symbolic and prestige objects such as beaded bracelets of various shapes and sizes, and <i>magatama</i> (comma-shaped) ornaments.<sup>1</sup> These bracelets were normally made of green jasper or green tuff, while the beads could be jade (especially <i>magatama</i> beads), jasper (especially cylindrical beads), and glass (small beads).<sup>2</sup> In several <i>kofun</i> these accessories were found in large numbers, far beyond those required for simple personal adornment, probably because they were placed in ritual form.<sup>3</sup> As with other prestige objects, these accessories also changed according to the social developments of the Kofun period in terms of the symbolic meaning they represented. In the Middle Kofun many of the beaded objects lost their political significance and were no longer direct symbols of status.<sup>4</sup> They were partly replaced by weapons as the main symbolic object, representing the change in the basis of the sovereign's legitimacy: from ritual in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to military force in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> In addition, many objects previously made of stone and jade were now replaced by talc, a material that was more readily available, softer and easier to carve.<sup>6</sup> Beads of different shapes (round and cylindrical) and <i>magatama</i> have also been found in several <i>sōshoku kofun</i> in Northern Kyūshū.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the decorated <i>kofun</i> of Ōzuka rare swamp oak beads, clay beads with a small depression and cylindrical beads were found.<sup>8</sup></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Barnes 2001b.  <sup>2</sup> Ibid.  <sup>3</sup> Ibid.  <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.  <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 2.  <sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Steinhaus/Kaner 2016.  <sup>7</sup> Data obtained from the database personally compiled on the basis of data provided by Dr Kawano of the Kyūshū Museum by private correspondence on 09 July 2021.  <sup>8</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 240</p>
Pottery	<p>Imported through a massive migratory flow from the Korean peninsula to the coasts of North Kyūshū between the Early and Middle Kofun, the typical pottery used in the Late Kofun funerary context mainly comprises Sue pottery.<sup>1</sup> It is pottery made on a potter's wheel and fired under reduced conditions in kilns that are completely or partially underground.<sup>2</sup> In addition to pots, the pottery includes perforated and unperforated pedestal dishes, often including lids, also perforated and unperforated.<sup>3</sup> They were usually placed near the individual bodies buried in the burial chamber.<sup>4</sup> Food remains, such as fish bones, have been found inside some Sue vases and dishes, indicating that they were used as containers for food and drink for the deceased to consume in the afterlife.<sup>5</sup></p> <p><sup>1</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 242.  <sup>2</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 222.  <sup>3</sup> Steinhaus/Kaner 2016, 230.  <sup>4</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 305.  <sup>5</sup> Mizoguchi 2013; Kawano 2023.</p>

**Table 2.**

*The main grave goods of the Late Kofun Period (created by author).*

TYOLOGY	CHRONOLOGY	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS	MAIN MOTIFS
sekkan-kei 石棺系	end of the 4 <sup>th</sup> c. CE-5 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	engraved or relief decorations on the stone sarcophagi	<i>chokkomon</i> circle - concentric circle armour (quiver, sword)
sekishō-kei 石障系	end of the 4 <sup>th</sup> c. CE-5 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	engraved or relief decorations on the stone barrier	<i>chokkomon</i> circle - concentric circle armour (quiver, sword)
hekiga-kei 壁画系	6 <sup>th</sup> c. CE - 7 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	decorations were directly painted or scratched on the walls of the stone burial chamber	geometric patterns armour (quiver, sword, shield) human figure, boats, animals narrative scenes
yokoana-kei 横穴系	6 <sup>th</sup> c. CE - 7 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	decorations were engraved on the outer stone walls near the entrance of the yokoana-style tombs	geometric patterns armour (quiver, sword, shield) human figure, boats, animals

**Table 3.**

*Classification of the different sōshoku kofun with the main characteristics (created by author).*

symbol of belonging to a certain identity affiliation and, therefore, the paintings were not intended to promote the status of the deceased.<sup>52</sup>

The motifs depicted can be divided as seen in table 4.<sup>53</sup> The tombs with continental motifs are in a very low number compared to other representations.

### THE DECORATED TOMB OF MEZURASHIZUKA

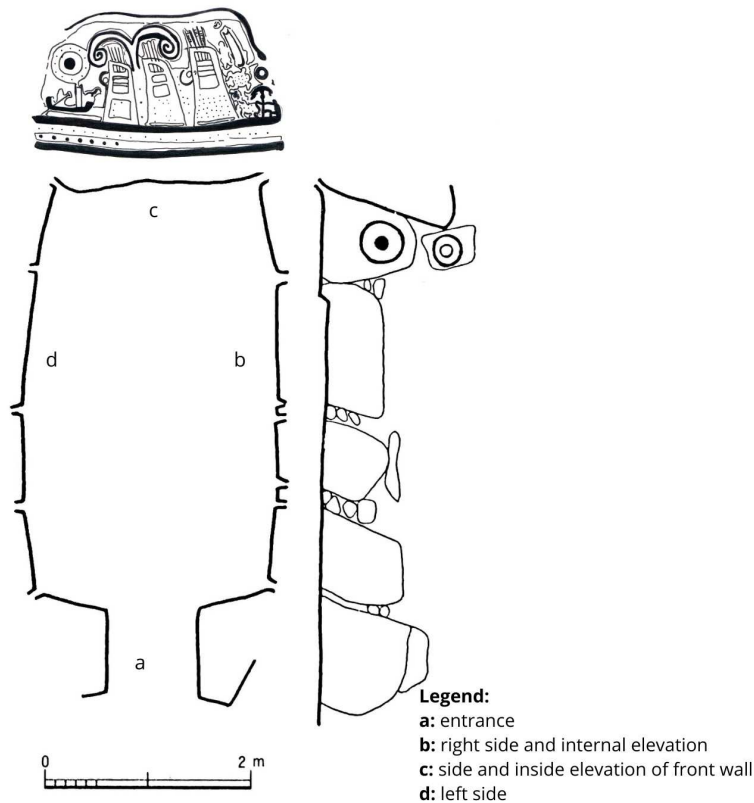
The tomb of Mezurashizuka is located in present-day Fukuoka Prefecture, within the area of the city of Ukiha. It was discovered in 1950 during construction works. It has an *enpun* (round) 円墳 shape and the internal structure is arranged as *yokoanashiki sekishitsu* (figure 7). It is assumed to date back to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The decorations are in the *hekiga-kei* typology (painting) and the colours used are red and blue. Nowadays, only the painting on the front wall of the burial

<sup>52</sup> Barnes 1992, 7.

<sup>53</sup> The data in the table are an elaboration of data acquired from Shinoto's (2015) database, from the Kyūshū Museum and from an observation of the photos of the tombs available to me. Motifs marked in Shinoto's (2015) database, that were unclear in the photos or could not be obtained, have been omitted from this analysis. I reserve the right in a future analysis, in which it will be possible to retrieve material directly from primary sources, to revise the data presented here.

MAIN CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORIES	N. OF SŌSHOKU KOFUN
Mainland motifs		7
Symbolic motifs	<i>chokkomon</i> 直弧文 (straight line and arc pattern); <i>sōkyakurinjōmon</i> 双脚輪状文 (cogwheel shaped circle with two ribbons like short projections); <i>warabitemon</i> 蕨手文 (leaf - plan pattern)	22
Animals	horse; other quadruped; bird; fish	26
Human figure	with weapons; with horse; with boat; simple	38
Boat	simple gondola-shaped boat; boat with two separate elements; boat with mast and sail	43
War-items patterns	quiver ( <i>yugi</i> 鞞); sword; shield	79
Geometric motifs	circle; concentric circle; triangle	177

**Table 4.** Division of the decorative motifs identified within the *sōshoku kofun* of Kyūshū and the amount of their presence within the repertoire (created by author).



**Figure 7.** Plan and interior elevation of the Mezurashizuka tomb (adapted from Yanagisawa 2022, figure 2, 128)

chamber has remained.

### *DESCRIPTION OF ICONOGRAPHY*

Looking at figure 8, the main iconography of the depicted scene can be subdivided and briefly described as shown in table 5.

### *DESCRIPTION OF ICONOLOGY*

The painting depicted in the tomb of Mezurashizuka is considered to be a reproduction of the deceased's journey from the world of the living to the afterlife.<sup>54</sup> This would be indicated by several symbolic elements present within the scene. The scene can be divided by the three quivers into:

- **left:** world of the living represented by the concentric circle, which would symbolise the sun, and the presence of the perching bird.<sup>55</sup> This element is a probable reference to the three-legged crow, that, in Chinese tradition, represents the sun.<sup>56</sup>

- **right:** world of the afterlife represented by toads, that symbolise the moon in continental culture and are, therefore, associated with the world of the dead.<sup>57</sup> In fact, since ancient times, in Chinese tradition the toad is linked to the moon and is depicted in wall paintings in the Koguryo tradition such as the Deokheung-ri tomb (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Ssangyeongchong tomb (end of 5<sup>th</sup> century CE).<sup>58</sup> Also, the other concentric circle (without dots) has been traced back to the depiction of the moon.

There are also elements of the Japanese tradition of that time used to protect the deceased from evil forces, such as: the quiver (4), the *warabitemon* (leaf - fern frond pattern) (3), which is thought to be associated with a talisman, as it would represent the life force of the first ferns and the desire for rebirth, and the concentric circle (7).<sup>59</sup> Another symbolic element is the boat: according to Shiraishi, Northern Kyūshū society would have absorbed a continental belief, that saw the other world in a very

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54 Regarding the connection between the painting and the afterlife, see Harunari 1999; Shiraishi 1999; Ōtsuka 2014. Some scholars, e.g. Tatsumi 2011, claim, that this is a depiction of the 'yomi' (the world of Hades) described in the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* books.

55 In the tradition of the Kyūshū decorated tombs, the circle and the concentric circle have often been connected with the reproduction of the mirror as well. The mirror is a prestige object that originated in the context of interactions between Northern Kyūshū and Han China during the Middle Yayoi Period. It is also a symbol of protection of the deceased (Shiraishi 1999, 76).

56 Harunari 1999, 226; Ōtsuka 2014, 116, 121; Shinoto 2015, 7.

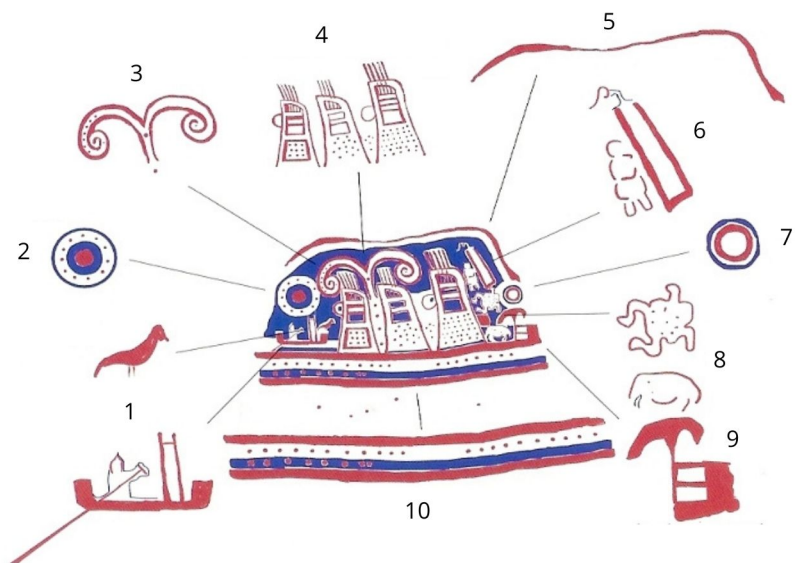
An example of the three-legged crow with a peacock crest (symbolising the sun) is visible in the ceiling mural of the burial chamber of the Ssangyeongchong tomb (Koguryo Kingdom, figure 9).

57 Harunari 1999, 226; Shiraishi 1999, 86.

An example of the toad (symbolising the moon) can be found in the ceiling mural of the burial chamber of the Ssangyeongchong tomb (Koguryo Kingdom, figure 9).

58 Harunari 1999, 226; Shiraishi 1999, 86; Ōtsuka 2014, 119; Nishitani 2020, 39.

59 Shiraishi 1999, 79; Kawano 2021, 243.



**Figure 8.**  
The painting on the front wall of the burial chamber of the Mezurashizuka tomb (image reproduced in the Mezurashizuka Kofun Museum, Ukiha).

NUMBER	ICONOGRAPHY	NOTES
1	boat with an oarsman on board and a bird perched on the prow	the boat reproduced here is of the so-called 'gondola' style, a style of boat already depicted in other elements of prehistoric Japanese art and also reproduced in the form of a <i>haniwa</i> . <sup>1</sup> The human figure is made in a very stylised style, typical of almost the entire tradition of <i>sōshoku kofun</i> , and does not present distinctive features such as helmets or armour. Between the oarsman and the bird, which is thought to be a crow or a seagull, there is a rectangular figure shape, perhaps a coffin. <sup>2</sup>  <small><sup>1</sup> E.g. the boat-shaped <i>haniwa</i> from Takarazuka tomb, Mie Prefecture (5<sup>th</sup> CE). <sup>2</sup> Ōtsuka 2014, 118.</small>
2	concentric circle with dots	
3	<i>warabitemon</i>	'fern frond', a botanical element typical of Japanese symbolism, here with two spiral ends and dots inside
4	<i>yugi</i> (quiver)	three large <i>yugi</i> stand in the centre of the painting, separating figure (1) from the rest of the scene. Inside the <i>yugi</i> are arrows. Between the first and the central <i>yugi</i> , the (3) <i>warabitemon</i> motif is painted.
5	line delimiting the upper part of the painting	
6	second human figure	the figure appears to be wearing balloon trousers and is holding or carrying a large rectangular object
7	concentric circle without dots	
8	two toads	one reproduced seen from above and the other frontally
9	a bird perched on a rectangular-shaped figure	
10	thick red and blue lines with dots	

**Table 5.**  
Iconographic description of the painting in the Mezurashizuka tomb (created by author).





**Figure 9.**  
 Replica of the painting of  
 "Lotus flower and the sun  
 and moon",  
 Ssangyeongchong tomb,  
 Koguryo Kingdom (courtesy  
 of the National Museum of  
 Korea).

distant place beyond the sea, accessed by sailing in a boat.<sup>60</sup> The thick lines below the scene may represent the ground or the sea, while the thicker points may be stars — another element probably influenced by the paintings of the Koguryo tombs — thus representing the night and a vast ocean, beyond which lies the other world.<sup>61</sup> A personal hypothesis is that the star dots were used not only to symbolise the night but also as orientation points for navigation, which can be found in other ancient cultures as well.

### **A MATTER OF IDENTITY: LOCAL, IMPORTED OR HYBRID?**

#### *PENINSULAR INFLUENCE ON STYLE, ICONOGRAPHY, AND ICONOLOGY*

The studies and analyses proposed here show how the Mezurashizuka tomb painting is composed of both local and 'foreign' elements perfectly intertwined in creating a narrative scene. This tomb is considered among the tombs with explicitly continental subjects and, therefore, had a direct influence on the peninsular tradition. However, it is important to understand to what extent we can identify peninsular influence on the style, the iconography, and the iconology. In the following, I have attempted to report the possible iconological significance based on current studies and critically evaluate the style used as an indicator of a possible cultural practice.

The first point of difference concerns the style of painting in the Mezurashizuka tomb, which is entirely different from the style used in the paintings of the tombs on the Peninsula compared to

<sup>60</sup> Shiraishi 1999, 85.

<sup>61</sup> These 'star-dots' were found, for example, in the Koguryo tomb of Jinpa-ri Tomb n. 4. For more information on studies of constellation representations in decorated tombs of the Koguryo kingdom and Nord Kyūshū, refer to Hirai 2018; Shiraishi 1999, 85.



the locally known style. Analysing the reproductions of the boat on Yayoi Period pottery, *dōtaku* ritual bells and vase-shaped *haniwa*, it appears that the style and iconography is very similar.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the iconography of the boat with perching birds was also found on a *haniwa* from two centuries before the reproduction of the Mezurashizuka tomb painting at Higashi Tonzuka, Tenri city (Honshū), dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE (figure 10). This indicates that the symbolic image reproduced in this sōshoku kofun was not used for the first time but would recall in style and subject matter a pre-existing tradition. Moreover, this iconography is also reproduced in the tomb of Torifunzuka (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE), while in the tomb of Haru (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE) a sailing scene is reproduced as well, but without the perching bird. Both paintings are realised in the same style of Mezurashizuka and are positioned very close to each other in Ukiha area.

Therefore, a significant point is that the peninsular style was not adopted. In fact, there was a strong flow of immigrants from Korea during the Kofun Period, who had brought technology, cultural and partly artistic aspects to the island. In addition, men were sent from Northern Kyūshū to the Peninsula territories for military and trade purposes. Therefore, just as certain Peninsular elements had been absorbed into the artistic culture of Northern Kyūshū, the mainland style of realisation could also have entered. Artisans and commissioners make a choice among all the different styles they can use.<sup>63</sup> Thus, a conscious choice may have been made to maintain a familiarity with the local and pre-existing artistic expression of the area. Since style can transmit social and personal identity and social identity is often archaeologically identified through a particular material culture, also decorated tombs in Kyūshū may aimed to show a specific identity affiliation.<sup>64</sup>

The peninsular influence is identified in some of the used iconography and iconology, but it is not as predominant as it might seem at first reading of the image. According to several studies, the depicted bird is a crow.<sup>65</sup> The crow itself is considered to be a symbolic animal already present in the Japanese society of that time.<sup>66</sup> It was considered to be a bird, that returns to the mountain in the evening, while its black plumage was associated with the image of the coming of night, thus creating an interrelation with the movement of the sun from day to night.<sup>67</sup>

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62 For more information on the development of the subject of the boat in prehistoric and protohistoric Japanese art and material culture, see Zancan 2022.

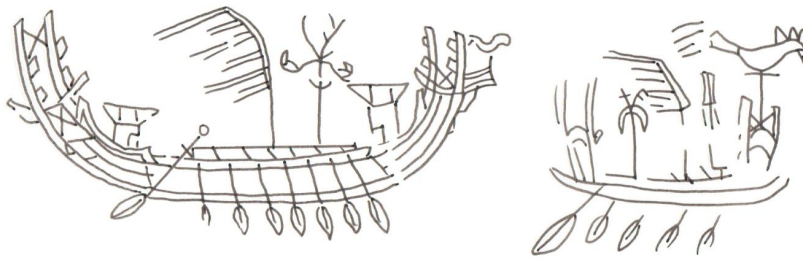
63 Sackett 1977, 370–371.

64 Regarding the correlation between material culture and identity affiliation, see Wobst 1977; Wiessner 1983; Spears 2011.

65 See Harunari 1999; Shiraishi 1999; Ōtsuka 2014.

66 Harunari 1999, 228.

67 Ibid.



**Figure 10.**  
 Reproduction of the engraving of boat 1 and 2 of the Higashi Tonozuka haniwa vase depicting a boat with a perching bird (after the original found in Nakayama-cho, Tenri city, Nara prefecture).

Having already had this image of the crow, it was therefore also possible to absorb the meaning of 'sun' from Chinese and Korean symbolism.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, the bird is depicted with two legs in this specific painting, so it could also be another type of bird, such as the seagull, which was often used for navigational guidance. Either way, the boat-bird composition was already known in the archipelago and used in a funerary context not only in the Kyūshū area. The fact that it has been reproduced in the form of a painting, reveals the desire to convey an existing concept in another artistic form. It is not clear yet, however, whether it is an image born in the Japanese archipelago or obtained during the centuries of interaction with the continent.

Some archaeological discoveries have shown that in the Kofun Period tradition the boat was used to transport the body and the soul of the chieftain: there were rituals, in which the body was towed on a ritual boat in full size to the entrance of the tomb.<sup>69</sup> A 'mourning boat' is also mentioned in documents of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) in reference to Japanese funerary practices of the Kofun Period.<sup>70</sup> Another relevant fact is, that, according to Wada, the ritual of carrying the deceased to the grave in a boat was reserved only for clan chiefs.<sup>71</sup> It is probable, therefore, that in the *sōshoku kofun*, in which the boat has been reproduced, a local clan chief was buried or, as Mizoguchi expounds, someone who had distinguished himself in life through exploits of considerable value, as was customary in Late Kofun.<sup>72</sup> According to Shiraishi, the presence of the subject of the boat in the *sōshoku kofun* is linked to the continental belief that the boat was the means of transport for the deceased to reach the afterlife.<sup>73</sup> The burial chamber would not be the end point but the intermediate route to the other world. The Mezurashizuka tomb painting can be placed

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> In 2006, a ritual boat with symbolic motifs, such as the *chokkomon* carved in the hull and with red pigment, was found in the moat of the Suyama *kofun* 粟山古墳 (Nara, late 4<sup>th</sup> - early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Wada 2009, 259, 261).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>71</sup> Wada 2009, 259–260.

<sup>72</sup> Mizoguchi 2013, 299.

<sup>73</sup> Shiraishi 1999, 74, 86.

in this context of the journey of the deceased, in which there are also other elements that recall the protection of the dead, such as the *warabitemon* motif, the three quivers and the concentric circle.

In conclusion, the answer to the question “to what extent we can identify peninsular influence on the style, the iconography, and iconology”, can be summarised as follows:

1. The style is purely local and was preferred to the peninsular one, probably to convey socio-cultural information, that the local style already had.

2. The mainland iconography and iconology are only identified in the figure of the toad representing the moon. By association, the bird has been linked to the crow-sun (as there is also a concentric circle above it), but it is uncertain whether it could be a crow and not another bird connected with navigation.

3. Although some studies believe that the depicted scene derives from a peninsular conception of the afterlife, this cannot be verified. In fact, symbolism with the boat and the world of the afterlife already existed locally in Kofun Period Japan, which is demonstrated by the discovery at the Suyama site.

#### *AN INTERTWINED PAINTING*

Nevertheless, the previous analysis does not explain why we find two intertwined artistic and cultural traditions in the painting. For a possible answer, we need to reconsider the archaeological context of Northern Kyūshū.

The southern Korean Peninsula and Kyūshū were in peer polity interactions for a long time engaged, which resulted in a homogeneous material culture (visible in the grave-goods) and in a sort of competitive emulation (visible from the erection of giant mounds). The *sōshoku kofun* are very particular tombs, which appeared first only in Kyūshū. The decorated tombs had for a long time been a tradition of the Chinese and Korean royal tombs.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the presence of these mounds in the Peninsula were already perceived by the common people as a symbol of a specific status (royal status) transmitted from China. Because of the consistent lack of the main pictorial subjects in the Peninsula decorated tombs (e.g., animals of the four directions and the representation of nobility), many scholars have interpreted the Kyūshū tombs as a local development with some sporadic continental influence. Barnes claims that one of the stages of the peer polity interactions between southern Korea and Kyūshū happened at the end of the Middle Kofun Period (end of the 4<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) “when craft technologies in the Yamato region are revolutionized by Paekche and Kaya

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74 Regarding the Korean royal tombs, see Kim 1986; Nelson 1993; Portal 2000.

immigrants”, and during the Late Kofun Period with the adoption of Buddhism from Paekche.<sup>75</sup> In addition, a feature of homogeneous material culture was shared based on the nature of this interaction, which is identified in the *yokoakashiki sekishitsu*. As Renfrew states, the erection of particular buildings and the transmission of innovations are two elements of the peer polity interaction connected to changes in the social-system.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the appearance of decorated tombs (particular building) and the round-shaped mounds with the stone passageway (innovation) of the Kyūshū tombs represent the ‘competitive emulation’, of which changes are often materialised into particular material culture. It is known, that there was the clan of Iwai in Northern Kyūshū, who was perceived as high-ranking and often in charge of Peninsular realities. As the decorated tombs of the Peninsula were royal tombs, and Kyūshū and the southern Peninsula had relations among the same political-status peers, this very powerful clan (and the clans/families close to it) would have shown its status and identity affiliation also through a very particular mound on the basis of the peer influence: the decorated tomb. Symbols, as it was for style, can convey and transmit specific identity information.<sup>77</sup> In order to self-identify a collective identity, the group usually uses a sort of ‘symbolic’ demarcation in its material culture, which can also be materialised.<sup>78</sup> In this case, again, the decorated tomb is a symbol of materialisation of an identity affiliation of a specific group.

No less important is it to include the various examples of hybridised material culture found in Northern Kyūshū since the Jōmon and Yayoi Periods (table 1) and the nature of the symbolic objects in the Late Kofun grave goods repertoire (table 2) in the discussion. What can be identified in the material culture of Kyūshū in the centuries before the decorated tombs is, that, instead of replacing the previous material culture with the ‘foreign’ one, Kyūshū people deliberately decided to create a new material culture with characteristics of both, without destroying the link to the local tradition entirely.<sup>79</sup>

To answer the second question “how to explain the presence of both, local and Peninsular subjects, in the Mezurashizuka's tomb painting”, it is possible to identify a materialisation of the society of the time in this tomb, that is to say, a hybrid society, that wanted to differentiate itself from the central power. I refer to it as ‘hybrid’ following Stockhammer’s definition because the new

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75 Barnes 2007, 36.

76 Renfrew 1986, 8.

77 Wiessner 1983, 256–258.

78 DeMarrais et al. 1996, 16–17; Shelach 2009, 77.

79 Mizoguchi 2013, 68.

material culture (the *sōshoku kofun*) combines the familiar (iconography and style) with the foreign element (decorations).<sup>80</sup> This society behind the decorated tombs emerged from a long-lasting process, in which an entanglement of social practices and meanings generated by the meeting of two cultures took place, leading to the creation of a transcultural object/art form, that combines the familiar with the unfamiliar.<sup>81</sup> A new material entity, in which choices are made about what to include and exclude from the previous tradition and the external. Once assimilated, these new hybrid identities — or entangled — are integrated and assumed by their users to be normative, as it has already happened with the material culture of Kyūshū centuries before.<sup>82</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Considering that images in non-literary societies are channels for sending information about the society and culture of the time, what information does the Mezurashizuka tomb painting convey to us?

From the data and information discussed in this paper, it is possible to summarise as follows:

1. The related society saw itself as different from the society of the central power. We know from later historical sources, that the political situation in Kyūshū was anything but stable and at odds with the central power. The decorated tombs may have appeared as a symbol of 'emulative competition' with the decorated tombs on the continent and as a materialisation of the ideology of the area. The symbolism of the decorated tombs as an 'elite symbol' was thus absorbed into the sphere of peer polity interaction.

2. The society behind decorated tombs had not entirely identified with the Peninsular culture either. This is because the recognised continental iconography and iconology is reduced to a single figurative subject (toad-moon) and three other hypothetical subjects (crow-sun, idea of the sea voyage to the afterlife, star-dots). Furthermore, the decision to use the pre-existing artistic style of Northern Kyūshū denotes that a conscious choice was made and that continuity with a local element was desired.

3. The Mezurashizuka tomb painting represents a materialisation of the society of the time that has been defined as 'hybrid' in this paper. This is because the archaeological context of Kyūshū reveals several examples of hybridisation in the artistic form, material culture, grave goods, and society in the area for

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<sup>80</sup> Stockhammer 2012, 50. Regarding the concept of 'hybrid' in ancient material culture, see Voskos/Knapp 2008; Ekengren 2009; Stockhammer 2012; Verstegen 2012; Deagan 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Stockhammer 2012, 50.

<sup>82</sup> Deagan 2013, 270.

centuries. Therefore, as the local society had been used to interacting with a hybrid material culture for centuries, it is not unusual to find both, local and peninsular elements, in a context, such as funerary art, perfectly intertwined.

In conclusion, the Mezurashizuka tomb painting is an excellent example of the materialisation of the society of the Late Kofun area: a culture with elements of peninsular origin derived from centuries of interactions and co-existence and, on the other hand, a local culture that wanted to differentiate itself from the central power that was establishing itself in the Nara Basin (Honshū).

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