

From the Earthly to the Celestial: Material Culture and Funerary Practice at Fujinoki Kofun

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In 1985, archaeologists excavating Fujinoki Kofun opened for the first time the tomb's sealed burial chamber. They were surprised to discover that not only had the site remained undisturbed by looters, but that it contained one of the most materially extravagant collections of grave-goods to have been recovered from Japan's Late Kofun period (500-600 CE).

Bridging the fields of archaeology and visual culture studies, this talk presents an examination of the Fujinoki site as a means of exploring prehistoric mortuary rituals. Moving beyond studies that relegate Japan to a passive role in a core-periphery relationship with mainland Asia, this study contends that the formal design of Fujinoki's grave-goods embody an intersection of multiple cultural traditions. These artifacts reflect the fluid exchange of people and ideas across the Japan Sea and display the integration of both Japanese and mainland derived materials into a funerary system specific to the sixth-century Nara Basin.

In particular, this talk explores the remains of a gilt-bronze saddle recovered from Fujinoki. The saddle, adorned with embossed and engraved images of mythological beasts, arabesques, and geometric patterns, derives from saddle manufacturing and ornamentation traditions linked to various regions of Japan and the East Asian mainland. I investigate the possible meanings this work would have held within sixth-century funerary beliefs, comparing its visual motifs with imagery from contemporaneous sites in China, Korea, and Japan, and propose that the saddle was intended to convey the deceased to the afterlife astride a heavenly horse.

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