

## Incredible discovery of pyramid-shaped tomb in Japan adds to mystery in Asuka

①Archaeologists in Japan have discovered that a large mound in the village of Asuka in Nara Prefecture contains a pyramid-shaped tomb underneath, according to a news release in the Japan Times. While work at the site is ongoing,



the tomb has preliminarily been dated to the latter half of the sixth century. The finding adds to the mystery in Asuka, where multiple carved granite stones in peculiar shapes are dotted across the region, including the most well-known structure - the Rock Ship of Masuda.

②Experts at the municipal education board and Kansai University's Archaeological Research Institute said that the newly discovered pyramid-like burial, which has been named the Miyakozuka tomb, is a terraced pyramid made of multiple stone layers. So far, researchers have excavated stepped layers made of stones packed with soil on three sides of the mound. Based on the height of the mound, it is believed that the tomb consists of seven or eight stone layers.

↑New excavations reveal that the ancient tomb in Japan apparently had a step-pyramid shape. Credit: Asuka Mura Public Office

③The pyramid-shaped tomb is buried under an earthen mound, which is up to 7 metres in height and 40 metres in length. Experts say the structure is similar to those found in the ancient kingdom of **Koguryo** (3rd century BC – 7th century AD), which reigned over north-eastern China and the northern part of the Korean Peninsula.

The village of Asuka is also known to be an ancient land with historical interest. It has its origins in the Tumulus Period (250-552 AD), also called Kofun jidai, which means Old Mound period. This era of Japanese history is characterised by a particular type of burial mound that was popular at the time; specifically key shaped earthen mounds surrounded by moats. However, the newly-discovered step pyramid is quite different to those that have already been found.

④While archaeologists have not yet identified the tomb's owner, one hypothesis is that it belongs to Soga no Iname, a Yamato Dynasty leader who died in 570 AD. Soga no Iname was a statesman who acquired great power from his control of immigrants from China and the Korean Peninsula, who brought cultural and technological advances with them to Japan. He had close ties to the Koguryo kingdom, so the architectural design of his tomb may have been influenced by the tombs associated with that kingdom.

⑤The village of Asuka is known for many megalithic discoveries, including the Ishibutai tomb believed to have been built in the seventh century for Soga no Umako, a son of Iname who died in 626. The largest and most enigmatic of the carved stones in Asuka is the Masuda-no-iwafune (the 'Rock Ship of Masuda'). The stone carving, which stands near the top of a hill in Asuka, is 11 metres in length, 8 metres in width and 4.7 metres in height, and weighs approximately 800 tonnes. The top of it has been completely flattened and there are two one-meter square holes carved into it and a ridge line that is parallel to both holes. At the base of the stone are lattice-shaped indentations which are believed to be related to the process that was used by the builders to flatten the sides of the rock.

⑥Numerous suggestions have been put forward to account for this unique structure. It has been suggested that the stone was carved in commemoration of the building of Masuda Lake, which was once located nearby (now drained and part of Kashiwara City), hence the name 'rock ship'. However, others have suggested it was an unfinished tomb, or an astronomical observation point. The ridge line across the top of the rock runs parallel to the mountain ridge in Asuka and lines up with the sunset on a certain day of the year called "spring doyou entry", which was important in the lunar calendar and for early Japanese agriculture as it signalled the beginning of the agricultural season.

⑦Very little is known about the Masuda no iwafune stone carving, as well as other megalithic structures and constructions in the region of Asuka. While it is hoped that further excavations may give up some of the secrets, in the end, the origin and purpose of these enigmatic features of ancient Japan may be lost to the pages of history. 【Aug 15, 2014/Ancient Origins】

③earthen 土で作った, 土製の\*earthen mound 盛土 Koguryo 高句麗 moat (都市・城壁の周囲に掘られた)堀. ⑤megalithic 巨石文化の enigmatic 謎の lattice 格子(こうし) ⑥astronomical observation 天体観測

### ★Ice breaker for active discussion★

1. Are you an archaeology fan? Were you excited about this discovery?
2. There are many giant ancient tombs discovered in Nara prefecture.  
Please explain why do you think they exist?
3. Have you ever visited Nara and tried to see these ancient archaeological discoveries?
4. Have you ever heard of theories how these structures were made or built?
5. How connected is the history of the countries China, Korea and Japan to each other?
6. History attracts people all the time. What is a mystery or discovery that interests you the most?
7. Please make sentences using the following words : Incredible, tomb, moat, enigmatic, statesman, architectural, lunar calendar, pyramid and megalithic.

舞台古墳 (7世紀前半) の南東およそ 400メートルに位置する都塚古墳。近くには蘇我氏の邸宅跡とみられる遺跡も見つかった。馬子以前の6世紀後半、蘇我氏の根拠地と言える場所に大規模な墓を造ることが出来たのは、馬子の父である蘇我稲目しかいないと推定されている。6世紀に活躍した蘇我氏の実力者は、欽明天皇の時代ナンバー2をつとめ、百濟から伝えられた仏教を崇拝。自分の娘3人を天皇に嫁がせ、馬子、蝦夷、入鹿と続く蘇我氏の権勢の基礎を築いた。孫同土から聖徳太子が生まれた。