

The Silk Road or the Sea? Sasanian and Islamic Exports to Japan

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This article considers the movement of commodities manufactured in southern Iraq during the Sasanian and Early Islamic periods to the furthest eastern extremity of the Old World: to the archipelago of Japan. In particular the focus is on two categories of non-perishable finds that survive within the archaeological record: glass vessels and turquoise blue alkaline glazed ceramic jars. We begin by providing an outline of the definition and dating of what is a commonplace and widely distributed ceramic product within the Middle East and western Indian Ocean area. It is then possible to place these finds within a broader context by reviewing the evidence for the earliest West Asian exports to Japan and what these might tell us about the mechanisms of their transmission and circulation and the role of such imports within an East Asian context. Specifically these include glass vessels dated to the Sasanian period followed some time later by ceramic vessels manufactured at the time of the Abbasid Caliphate. The continued arrival of Islamic glass into this later period is not a subject that will be covered specifically as it does not contribute directly to the main arguments that are developed below. Finally the finds are used to shed light on the broader debate surrounding the development of the Indian Ocean economy and to what extent Japan itself may have been commercially integrated within a wider commodity exchange network.

Commodity exchange between the Middle East and Japan

The earliest archaeological evidence for the transmission of material goods between the Middle East and Japan comes in the form of two main finds categories: glass and glazed ceramic vessels. The main aim of this study is to provide a review of the archaeological evidence associated with the distribution and finds contexts of glazed ceramic vessels from the Middle East in Japan. This is based on an examination of many of the relevant fragments held in different storage locations around the city of Fukuoka on the southern island of Kyūshū, together with a review of the available published sources. The examination confirms that these vessels are all of a standard-

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