

THE PROVENANCE OF THE WHALEBONE *SHAKU*, ITEM NO. 87 IN THE MIDDLE SECTION OF THE SHŌSŌ-IN

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There are six ancient *shaku* (batons) in the collection of the Shōsō-in. Two are made of ivory, two are whalebone, and two are wood. Each displays the typical form of the archaic *shaku*, and one of the whale-bone *shaku* and the two wooden *shaku* are nearly identical in size and shape. Of these three nearly identical *shaku*, the one made of whalebone has an inscription indicating that it was made in the 5th year of the Engi era (905). This article is intended as an attempt to clarify the meaning of that inscription.

Shaku were held by government officials at ceremonies and were used to provide an air of dignity and to convey something when in the presence of the emperor or to record memoranda in preparation for future court events. According to the ancient Japanese legal codes, high-ranking aristocrats were to hold ivory *shaku* and lower-ranking officials were supposed to hold those made of wood, but there were no legal stipulations concerning *shaku* made of whalebone. The *shaku* were, on the other hand, also used as one of the accoutrements of the classical dance costume. It was determined that one of the wooden *shaku* in the Shōsō-in collection was used for *gigaku* (theatrical dance) performed at Tōdaiji. Moreover, *shaku* are listed as accessories for use in the classical dance in a number of the ancient ledgers of temple assets, and I have been able to confirm that there were *shaku* made from bone in addition to *shaku* made of wood and ivory. In other words, since the whalebone *shaku* in question was kept at Tōdaiji, we can surmise that it was a *shaku* employed for the classical dance, *bugaku*.

In regard to the inscription on this *shaku*, there has yet to be a satisfactory explanation of its meaning. In this article I theorize that the 20th day of the fifth month of Engi 5 (905) was the day of the completion of the transfer of the abbacy of Tōdaiji to the new abbot Kaisen (843–908), who replaced the former abbot, Dōgi (837–905), who had died in the third month of the year. At the time, the appointment of abbots of temples was strictly managed by the central government, and it was standard practice to submit a report documenting the transfer and continuation of the office. In addition, it is thought that the assets of the temple were recorded in detail, and that a record of this whalebone *shaku* would probably have been found there.