

Abstract for *The Idea of Writing IX* (2012) – Sven Osterkamp (Bochum University)

**Names reduced to writing & writing reducing names –
Being some observations on early Japanese place name spellings**

The readings of proper names constitute a special challenge for readers of Japanese up to the present day. The current situation has its roots deep in the past inasmuch as the tendency towards a greater disparity between spoken and written forms with proper names than with general language is already observed in written sources dating from the 7th to 8th centuries.

In the proposed paper we will concentrate on the written representations of place names in early Japan and try to pinpoint what exactly contributes to the relative difficulty often experienced in their decoding. Major factors to be addressed here include for instance abbreviations and extra-linguistic factors, some of which appear to be restricted to proper names.

Making use of a mixed morphographic and phonographic writing system with the possibility to use any given character in either of these two manners, semantic considerations may figure even in what are basically instances of phonographic writing. In fact it is not only possible to add an extra layer of meaning by virtue of each character's inherent potential polyvalency, semantic considerations may also have the force to override efforts at an adequate phonetic rendering. To name but one example: If Nara, the name of the capital city, is written as 寧樂 ('tranquility' + 'delight'), this can hardly be justified by the characters' expected sound values alone – Early Middle Chinese *nɛŋ-lak, which under normal circumstances yielded an Old Japanese reading like /negVrakV/ –, but only by the auspicious semantics involved. Similar phenomena with writing fulfilling a double role are at times also observed in early poetry for instance, but they are exceptional for the writing system as a whole.

As far as abbreviations are concerned, ones on the level of single characters are for all practical purposes universal. They were not only the prerequisite for the formation of the later and current syllabaries, but were also common before and after that in the morphographical half of the writing system. Thus for instance one frequently merely wrote the lower right quarter of the character [Ch. *shí*] 時 'time', i.e. [Ch. *cùn*] 寸 'inch', to write the word *toki* 'time'. Of greater interest are however abbreviations on the level of larger linguistic units requiring multiple characters for a full(er) representation. Place names provide us with a wealth of cases here, often without any parallels outside the sphere of proper names. For instance, the complex province name *Kibwi=no miti=no naka* 'middle part of the road through Kibwi' is attested as *Kibwi=[no] miti=[no] naka* 吉備道中 (/ki/ + /bwi/ + 'road' + 'middle part') with only the attributive particle *=no* being left implicit twice. With official regulations of place name spellings coming into effect in the early 8th century this was reduced to digraphic 備中 (/bwi/ + 'middle part'), at first without any change in the name itself: it was still [*Ki*]bwi=[no miti=no] *naka*, just in an overall less explicit rendering. Now while matters thus started out with the simple shortening of the name's written representation, such names themselves were reduced as well in the long run, here yielding something like *Bitiū* at first [modern *Bittyuu*], deriving from the two characters' 備中 Sino-Japanese readings (cf. Early Middle Chinese *bi^h-truŋ).

Written forms of proper names may thus exhibit properties not necessarily present in the writing system as applied to general language – in any case not anywhere as frequent. The present paper will therefore aim at an inventory of such name-specific phenomena in early Japanese place names, also to provide the basis for a comparison with potentially similar constellations, as e.g. in cuneiform.