

Articles by NDL staff

Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 4

Was ebony-colored paper a hallmark of imperial documents!?

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This is a translation of the article in Japanese of the same title in *NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 677/678 (September / October 2017)*.

The series Browsing Library Materials features old documents from medieval Japan that require a bit of explanation to be fully appreciated. Here is a list of the past articles of the same series:

- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 1: A document from an arrogant sender?](#) (No. 212, June 2017)
- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 2: Shoguns of the](#)

[Kamakura Shogunate "reigned but did not rule"?](#) (No. 213, August 2017)

- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 3: A document within a document?](#) (No. 214, October 2017)



Rinji issued on behalf of Emperor Go-Murakami dated in February 17, 1352
From *Shohei 7nen rinji*, NDL call no: WA47-7

*Available in the [National Diet Library Digital Collections](#)

"What the heck! Why is this paper so black?"

That might be your first reaction when you see this document. This paper is not black with age nor is it soiled. The blackness of the paper is an important feature of this document.

First, let's take a look at the content and the style of this document. This document grants official recognition from

the Imperial Court to the estate of Sanko-ji (Sanko Temple) near Kyoto, and was issued in 1352 by Emperor Go-Murakami, the emperor of the Southern Court during the Northern and Southern Courts period. The Emperor's name, however, does not appear anywhere in the document. Beneath the date, there is a signature and *kao* by Hamuro Mitsusuke (marked ①), a nobleman

and close confidante of Emperor Go-Murakami. In medieval Japan, individuals in high positions often conveyed their intent through documents written and signed by a trusted vassal—a practice known as *hosho*. At the top of the third column from the left is the word 天氣 (marked ②), which signifies the Emperor's intent and indicates that this document was issued in accordance with the Emperor's will. Placing the word 天氣 at the top of a column is a typical convention for showing respect to the Emperor. Documents written as *hosho* and stating the Emperor's will are called *rinji*. The ebony color of the paper is another important convention associated with the practice of *hosho*. Most *rinji* are written on special paper, called *shukushi*, which is made in an agency of the Imperial Court and

used only by *kurodo*, who are close associates of an emperor.

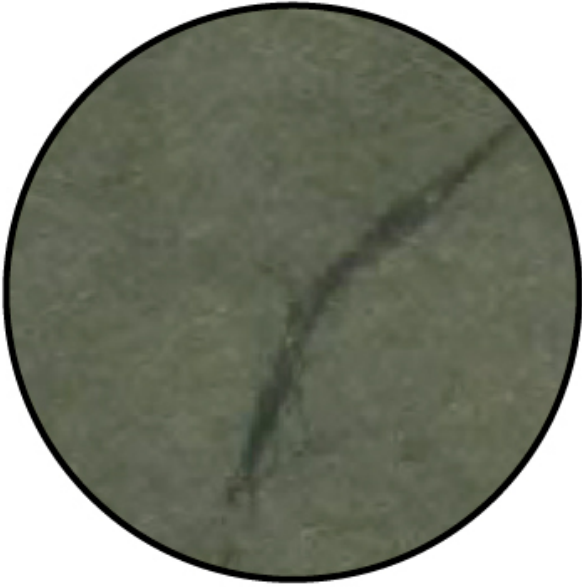
Shukushi is made by recycling used *washi* (Japanese paper)*. Paper was a precious commodity and was often recycled. One notable feature of *shukushi* is its ebony hue, caused by the ink of original document staining the paper fibers when they are dissolved during the recycling process. Ebony-colored paper became a hallmark of imperial documents, and eventually techniques were developed to make the paper even darker. The darker the paper, the more impressive the imperial document.



Figure showing the process of recycling *washi*

Hamuro Mitsusuke, the writer of this document, was a *kurodo* at the Southern Court, so we can expect this *rinji* to have been written on *shukushi*, and a close examination reveals a number of characteristics that corroborate that assumption. There is a black mark, marked ③, that was not written with a brush but rather is a residual black fiber from the original paper. Although difficult to see in the photograph, there is also a big fiber mass on the left side of the document, which is probably

a tangled mass of fibers from the original paper. In addition, there are some small mica flakes on the surface of the paper, which sparkle in light and seem to indicate that the original paper was quite likely from a decorative sutra or a luxurious book.



An enlargement of the black fiber labeled ㊸

This document was issued at a time of civil war between the Northern and Southern courts. (See Column below.) The use of ebony-colored *shukushi* like this is a symbol of the Southern Court's claim to legitimacy despite having left the Imperial capital of Kyoto. It is possible that a close comparison of *shukushi* used by the Southern Court with that used by the Northern Court or in the Southern Court at a different period will yield valuable information about politics of the Southern Court during this era.

Column: This document and the political situation – Rinji of the Southern Court

The political situation in February 1352, when this document was issued, was a turning point for the Southern Court.

After a confrontation with the Shogun, Ashikaga Takauji, Emperor Go-Daigo had fled Kyoto southward for Yoshino, in present-day Nara Prefecture, where he established an Imperial court in 1336. Takauji set up an alternate Imperial court in Kyoto, thereby creating competing Imperial entities, which became known as the Northern and Southern Courts. Upon Go-Daigo's death, his son, Go-Murakami, ascended to the throne as the second emperor of the Southern Court and continued to resist the Muromachi Shogunate of the Ashikaga clan. Antagonism between the Shogun, Ashikaga Takauji, and his brother, Ashikaga Tadayoshi, resulted in a civil war, known as the *Kanno no joran* (Kanno disturbance). Takauji employed a novel strategy by submitting to the Southern Court, thereby abolishing the Northern Court, dethroning its Emperor and ousting its crown princes. This temporary unification of the Northern and Southern Courts is called *Shohei no itto* (The Shohei Unification), and it lasted from October 1351 to February 1352.

This document was issued near the end of the *Shohei no itto*. In fact, numerous documents issued by the Southern Court at that time remain extant today. This is likely due to the fact that there were many noble families as well as temples and shrines who thought the Southern Court would return to Kyoto and institute a change of administration. They therefore each endeavored to obtain guarantees from the Southern Court for their territory and official ranks. Sanko-ji, the recipient of this document from the Southern Court, is no doubt one of them.

* One theory given for why *shukushi* was produced at an agency of the Imperial Court is related to the idea that materials for making paper became scarce in Kyoto during the Heian period.

(Illustrations by Satsuki Shobo,
translated by Kanako Ogawa)