

Articles by NDL staff

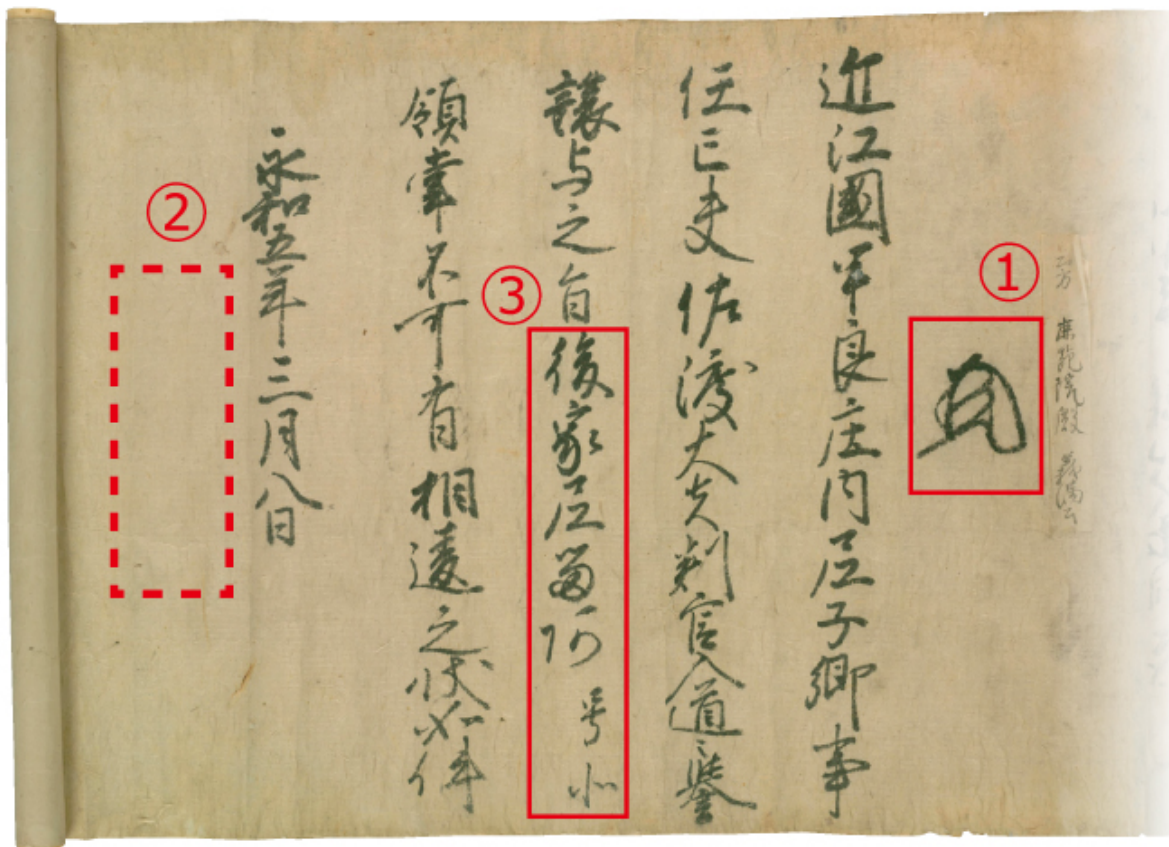
Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 1

A document from an arrogant sender?

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This is a translation of the article in Japanese of the same title in *NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 673 (May 2017)*.

The new series "Browsing library materials" features materials from the NDL's collections that require a bit of explanation to be fully appreciated. Here is an old document from medieval Japan.



Gohan no migyosho (Shogunal Order) by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu dated in March 8, 1379

From *Sasakike monjo*, NDL call no: WA25-69

*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

In medieval Japan, written documents generally followed a prescribed format and style, and it is not possible to appreciate fully many of these documents without first understanding the conventions of the times, which are often a clear indication of the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

This document has been selected here to illustrate how the relationship between the sender and the recipient has been expressed formally. This type of document is called *gohan no migyosho* (Shogunal Order) and was written by the Muromachi-period Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, on March 8, 1379. One characteristic of this kind of document is shogun's kao or stylized signature. (See Column 1.) This document was sent by Yoshimitsu, the

third Muromachi shogun, to a woman named Kita, who was married to Sasaki Doyo, an influential person in the Ashikaga Shogunate, who was also known as "*basara daimyo*" for his free-wheeling behavior and extravagant tastes. The gist of this document is that Yoshimitsu approved Kita's inheritance of a part of Doyo's land after his death. (See Column 2.)

[Column 1] Kao

A *kao* is a kind of stylized signature that was commonly used in place of an official seal impression until the end of the Sengoku period in the early 17th century. Although the use of a kao in official documents continued until the

mid-19th century, carved seals gradually became more common during the 17th century, and had become the standard form of authorization by the end of the Edo period.



In medieval Japan, the word 判 usually referred to a *kao* rather than to a carved seal, as it does today. In general, only the *kao* was actually written by the sender, and the body of the letter was most likely the work of a scribe.

Thus, it is likely that the *kao* is the only part of this document that was actually written by Yoshimitsu.

[Column 2] Ando

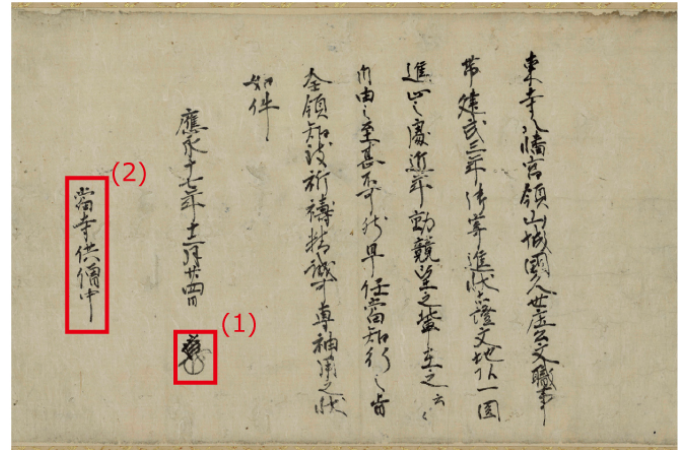
The Japanese expression "*isshokenmei*" originally referred to the fact that a samurai would stake his life on overseeing his own territory. Only later did it come to be used in its current sense of "unrestrained effort." In medieval Japan, an *ando* was official recognition by a person in authority of an underling's right to oversee a particular tract of land. A document in which a Shogun issued an *ando* was authoritative and would be carefully preserved by the recipient.

In this document, Kita, who was the wife of Sasaki Doyo, was issued an *ando* by shogun Yoshimitsu. It was not unusual for women to be granted ownership of land in medieval Japan.

Reading this document, it would appear from the writing style that Yoshimitsu is being highly disdainful of the recipient. There are two major points that indicate this attitude.

The first one is the location of the name and *kao*. In a properly formatted *gohan no migyosho*, either the *kao* itself or both the name and the *kao* would be placed under the date on the left. But placing the *kao* to the left of the date can be seen as an indicator of a dismissive attitude. And in this document, with the *kao* on the far right, it would appear to be highly disdainful (①).

The second point is placement of recipient's name, which would normally be placed to the left margin (②). In this document, however, the recipient's name appears within the body of the text (③), which is another indication of disdain.



Reference document: *Gohan no migyosho* by Ashikaga Yoshimochi dated in December 24, 1410
From Toji hyakugo monjo
Collection of Kyoto Institute, Library and Archives
<http://hyakugo.kyoto.jp/contents/detail.php?id=10733>

For reference, the picture above shows a *gohan no migyosho* from Ashikaga Yoshimochi, the fourth Shogun. Although the style is similar for the most part, notice that the *kao* is placed beneath the date (1) and the recipient's name on the left (2). Even though these documents are both *gohan no migyosho*, the attitudes of the senders are clearly different. The second document was sent to Toji, a large Buddhist temple in Kyoto, while the first document was sent to the wife of a samurai. This difference in attitude is perhaps an indication that the Shogun felt entitled to complete domination over samurai even as he recognized the need to show deference to some religious orders.

(Translated by Kanako Ogawa)