

**Japanese Burial Mounds:  
An Application of Rational Wealth Destruction<sup>1</sup>**

Benjamin Seevers<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

In this paper I analyze the history of Japanese burial mounds through the lens of rational choice theory, applying economics, especially the theory of purposeful wealth destruction. Japanese burial mounds were constructed to discourage property rights predation. I then deal with some problems with the explanation and alternative explanations.

Keywords: *Japanese Studies, Kofun, Wealth Destruction, Inheritance*

JEL Codes: N45, N95, Z1, Z13

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<sup>2</sup> Email: officialbenjaminseevers@gmail.com

## I. Introduction

For a period of almost a thousand years, the people of Japan engaged in the practice of constructing large, mounded tombs. There are a total of 161,560 of these burial sites across the Japanese archipelago that we know of ranging from highly populated areas to small islands (UNESCO 2019; PAM 2022). A variety of explanations have been given for this phenomenon ranging from the religious to potlatch, which is the most common explanation for similar phenomenon elsewhere in the world. It is my contention that this practice was engaged in to provide security.

This is not exclusively a Japanese phenomenon. This practice was engaged in all across the North American continent by Native Americans for at least a thousand years (Putnam 1889-1890).<sup>3</sup> This was practiced by various European cultures as well (Knopf *et al* 2018). Bahrain has burial mounds too (UNESCO 2019). Additionally, this was also a practice in China and Korea.

The practice of this in Japan was explained well by Chinese officials visiting the Japan sometime from 220-265 AD; “When a person dies, he is placed in a coffin (which is buried directly in the grave) without an outer protective layer. The grave is then covered with the earth to make a mounds,” (Lu 2005, p 12).

There is clearly a rational explanation for this practice. Its constancy across time and generality is implicative of this. My explanation invokes the conspicuous wealth

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<sup>3</sup> A. Sam Branthoover and I are currently working on a paper in which we attempt to explain the phenomenon of native North American burial mounds in the Scioto-Hopewell region using a rational choice framework.

destruction theory of Harris and Kaiser (2020), grave goods were placed in these mounds in order to destroy insecure wealth to prevent violent conflict over resources.

The goal of this paper is a revision of how current historians think about the phenomenon of Japanese burial mounds, expanding the literature on a fascinating aspect of economics and on one of the most interesting and common place archaeological sites in Japan.

This paper will attempt to explain this interesting phenomenon of Japanese burial mounds using the framework of conspicuous wealth destruction / rational wealth destruction. The theories of relevant writers will be discussed, and the relevant history of Japan will be explicated. I will attempt to fit the history in the model of rational wealth destruction and parse it up against the alternative explanations. Ancillary economic considerations will be considered, and I will conclude with a summation of the paper and its fundamental contributions.

## **II. Literature Review**

In order to make sense out of historical phenomenon, it is necessary to review the relevant economic literature on the topic. Japanese burial mounds are examples of rational wealth destruction. They did so voluntarily over a long period of time across Japan; therefore, indicating that the people engaging in this practice were doing it for a wealth maximizing reason, which implies *ex post* success. It is my contention that people engaged in this practice to provide security.

Wealth maximizing wealth destruction at first seems counter intuitive, but the practice of conspicuous wealth destruction was first noted and elaborated on in Schoeck

(1966); essentially, to lessen the negative effects of envy in society, norms regarding wealth destruction arise (Schoeck p 59). Schoeck rightly notes that the social sciences have elaborate and extensive theories on wealth creation, and that they never address the tendency for some human activities to aim at a “diminution” or a “lessening of assets,” (Schoeck p 59). Schoeck expounds on this further by giving examples of peasants in Guatemala buying “several smaller fields rather than one larger piece of land” in order to appear poorer than they actually are to stave off envious expropriators. Further evidence is given for this case in describing how, in Nigeria, crops of a lesser efficiency are produced in order to forego riches which would be expropriated by envious neighbors (Schoeck 1966). This theory is also applied to Indian farmers and their reluctance to use new seed and/or fertilizer (Schoeck pp 74-75).

Perhaps developed independently from Schoeck (1966), Scott (2009, pp 195-196) posits the theoretical good of “escape agriculture” in order to explain how tribes in Southeast Asia prevent state formation. Following the pattern of Nigerian farmers, Southeast Asian farmers produce crops with a lower value to weight ratio to provide security for themselves. Rather than providing internal security, this norm prevents external predation due to changing the cost/benefit structure of potential invaders. The invaders cannot obtain a worthwhile reward from invasion, so they opt not to do so.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James Scott also describes the region of Zomia in Southeast Asia where people have moved up into the mountains in order to escape the creation of states. Interestingly enough, lords in Japanese history had the same idea; “ But in the great process of national centralization, which was the main task of Japan’s rulers down to at least the seventeenth century, the mountains offered an ideal retreat for local lords, who wanted to hold on to their authority, and for anti-centralizing forces in general.” (Nish 1968, p 21). Perhaps “running for the hills” is a way of avoiding states, but framing it in rational choice theory, it is obvious based on this quote that lords were aware of the trade off between gross value and security.

This theory was brought into the economic literature by Allen (2002), independently from both Scott and Schoeck, in describing how cutting off a rhino's horn in fact protects the rhino from poachers. Doug Allen adapts Coase (1937)'s groundbreaking contribution that transactions costs are not always zero and the contribution of Allen (1991)<sup>5</sup> that transaction costs are fundamentally the cost of protecting property rights, into a framework for understanding purposeful wealth destruction. The theory is that rational actors by decreasing the gross value of a good they increase their security. The logic is fairly straight forward; holding all else equal, increasing the value of any given good will increase the benefit that potential expropriators can get from attempting to extract it. Decreasing the gross value of the good would do the opposite; therefore, discouraging expropriation. Altering the tradeoffs of invading is vital for diminishing the risk the invasion. This is the general theory of purposeful wealth destruction.

Leeson (2014) applies this theory to explain human sacrifice in India; sacrificing young boys decreased the potential benefits of invasion; resulting in more security despite of less wealth (male children). Influenced by Leeson (2014), Harris and Kaiser (2020), use the theory for explaining Viking grave goods. This is most important for the incoming analysis. The ultimate insight of Harris and Kaiser (2020) is that when inheritance rights are ambiguous and money is not present, indivisible goods of the deceased will be destroyed rather than given to one of the potential inheritors. This is a method of preventing internal conflict between potential inheritors in Viking communities. Throughout the

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<sup>5</sup> This theoretical insight has been used to explain a host of other cultural practices as well. Most notably, Peter Leeson has done research on strange and outrageous practices such as child brides, oracles, wife auctions, medieval ordeals, gypsy law, witch trials, etc. His work can be found at [peterleeson.com](http://peterleeson.com)

literature on rational wealth destruction, there are two motivating factors, desires against both internal and external predation. In the case of Japan, which is it? It is best to let the historical record speak. Once the historical overview is complete, it will be clear that the conditions necessary for a similar practice are met.

There are numerous variables which determine the total demand for conspicuous wealth destruction in a society, as will be illustrated with the history. For starters, as has been elaborated previously, the intensity of transaction costs is one determinant. Furthermore, one could add population density (Hoppe 2015, p 27), social stratification (dispersion between the wealth of the poor and rich), and environmental factors (such as environment-caused changes in resources). These will be touched upon in the historical overview and later fleshed out.

## **Japan and its Mounds**

### *Pre-History and Early Japanese History*

Early human history in general is characterized by a flock from one regional to another in quick procession. Every man that lived in prehistorical society, faced the choice between innovating, immigrating, or fighting in order to at least live a hand-to-mouth existence (Hoppe 2015, p 27). Due to the technological incapacity to innovate meaningfully and the relatively high cost of violence (Hoppe 2015, p 27), man opted to emigrate. This quickly dispersed man across the globe, eventually leading humanity to Japan. The date of the first immigration to Japan is debatable, ranging from one million years ago to only 30,000 years ago (Henshall 2004, pp 7-8). The earliest human remains date back to the latter estimation (Henshall 2004, p 7). After a period of global warming,

Japan was connected to the Asian continent for about 15,000 years, and during a period of global cooling, land retracted severing Japan from the rest of the Asian world (Henshall 2004, p 8). The problem of immigration described by Hoppe was exacerbated under these conditions, but this time there was no easy way to move; Japan would be more geographically constrained from this point in time.

During this time period, there was little wealth to accumulate. Ultimately, consumption more than likely being equal to production led to a general lack of capital accumulation; therefore, a lack of economic development. Society was relatively horizontal with little to no stratification (Henshall 2004, p 13).

This period of prehistory is entitled the *Jomon* period, and it stretches from the very first human inhabitants arrived at the archipelago until the 300 BC. During this time period, the hand-to-mouth production processes of farming developed, taking Japan out of a strictly hunting and fishing economy (Nish 1968, p 20).

During this time period, Henshall (2004, p 7) seemingly affirms Hobbes' famous denouncement of the primitive world that it was "nasty, brutish, and short," stating that Japan during this time was a "world of violence and sudden death" and that cruelty was common place (Hanshall 2004, p 7). However, the only evidence for this violence comes from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, which are both books that Hanshall (2004, p 6) casts doubt over being that they were written by court intellectuals trying justify the current ruler (Henshall 2004, p 6). Was it really so violent? Doubtful.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Given the composition of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* taking place after the Kofun period and they frequently misdate events, these myths may be more reflective of the violence that took place after the *Jomon* or *Yayoi* periods.

After the ending of the *Jomon* period in 300 BC, came the *Yayoi* period (Walker p 15). There are many things that set the *Yayoi* period apart from the *Jomon*. First, there emerged a social elite whereas the *Jomon* period had no discernable social stratification (Henshall 2004, p 11). This may be primarily due to the accumulation of capital and the increase of trade that occurred during this time period (Henshall 2004, p 11.) Secondly, there was increased immigration from the Asian mainland, which brought both innovation and conflict (Henshall 2004, p 12). Thirdly, increased technological innovation led to an increase in the ability for war to be executed (Henshall 2004, p 13). This jumps over the early hurdles to war addressed by Hoppe (2015, p 27). Fourth, prior to the *Yayoi* period, there was a complete halving of the population from 200,000 to 100,000 (Henshall 2004, p 11). It is definite that something drastically altered the ability of the people to survive on the archipelago, contributing to increased conflict. Lastly, and most importantly, the *Yayoi* period is when we first see the use of mounded burial tombs (Nish 1968, p 20).<sup>7</sup> The introduction of mounded burial tombs coincides with the introduction of iron implements, weapons and tools, as well (Nish 1968, p 20).

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<sup>7</sup> During the *Jomon* period, there was a practice of constructing shell mounds out of the shells of shellfish (Tsutsui 2007, p 13-14). Such mounds are confounding at the moment. It is unclear to me whether these mounds contained any grave goods or not or if they even contained human remains. One thing is clear to me; that is it was not a very common practice. Even if it were to have human remains or goods in them, my point would still stand. It would make sense for this norm to exist in some form during some of the more developmental years of the *Jomon* period. There was no clear social strata during *Jomon*, but there was clearly some development in the technology of farming. There might have been some social stratification, but not enough to discern. The fact that there are not many of these shell mounds of note affirms this. This practice continued into the *Yayoi* period as well, running concurrently with the construction of earthen burial mounds. The shell mound phenomenon might have been from just waste from catching and eating shellfish, a common thing for the people during this time to do. Although, it would be expected that they would not put anything to waste either. More investigation into this is necessary.



There was another practice of erecting piles of rock called dolmens (Walthall 2006, pp 4-5). These dolmens would be built over top of graves (Walthall 2006, pp 4-5). It is possible that this phenomenon was a prototype of the later larger mounds construction projects. In the last century BC, the first of the larger burial mounds were constructed (Totman 2005, p 42). *Funkyubu*, a lesser known iteration of the mounds, were common during the Yayoi period (Forsyth 2009). These were roughly the same as the circular mounds mentioned earlier (Forsyth 2009). They contain grave goods, and are seemingly the same as the circular *kofun* (Forsyth 2009).

The Yayoi period ran from 300 BC to 300 AD, yielding to the Kofun period, named after the *Kofun*, one of the more notable facets of the time period. The most notable of these mounds take on a keyhole shape and were immense complexes. This important variation that will be dealt with later.

However, it is important to note that keyhole-shaped mounds were not the most common (UNESCO 2019; PAM 2022); the most common were the mounds (Forsyth 2009; UNESCO 2019; PAM 2022). During this time period the archipelago was organized into 100 confederations or principalities warring with each other (Forsyth 2009). Due to the lack of a centralized state, governance was more likely provided by informal norms than formal structures of governance (Forsyth 2009).

We know that circular mounds were observed by Chinese ambassadors to Japan prior to the beginning of the Kofun or at the beginning of the Kofun period (Lu 2005, p 12). These mounds were mainly for emperors and royalty. What they describe is not an immense tumulus structure like the keyhole-shaped mounds. The Chinese ambassadors

were likely witnessing the creation of a mound similar to that of most mounds created during the Yayoi period.

After the Kofun period (300-538 AD), Japan entered the Asuke period in which the mounds fell into disuse, phasing out until the Nara period in which the practice more-or-less died. The practice experienced a permadeath in 710 AD at the latest, with the last breath of the *Asuke* period, some of the latest mounds being dated as recent as the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (Forsyth 2009). By this time, money finally arose in Japan (Sansom 1958, p 88), a copper currency was circulating after 708 AD (Sansom 1958, p 88). Prior to this the people of Japan preferred using iron spades and hoes as currency according to Sansom (1958, p 88). The strength of this commodity money was strictly limited as the people could typically produce only as many as they consumed (Sansom 1958, p 88). The process of discovery of money is not immediate; it took a while for Japan to develop this tool, but once they did, it helped solve the problems presented by illiquidity.

So, what happened? The formation of a definite central, unifying state at the end of the Kofun period most likely led to a general decrease in transaction costs. The legal structure was more consistent across the archipelago and there were no longer competing confederations and principalities undermining legal order by invading.. Additionally, money began to form in the archipelago in a useful, portable form of copper coinage rather than the illiquid and bulky iron spades and hoes, enabling resources conflicted over to be divided.

The variation in the form burial mounds take implies that there is more than one motivation present. From the history, there appears to be two motivating factors in creating

burial mounds, a desire for minimizing internal and external predation. Both are influenced this institution.

### *Data*

Unfortunately, most of the burial mounds in Japan have seemingly not been excavated. So, we have to settle for going off of what others have already reported.<sup>8</sup> Forsyth (2009) records the contents of three Japanese burial mounds.

Some of the grave goods are not explicit in terms of what they are. Forsyth (2009) in her study is less worried about what was in the mound and more specifically with what era the pottery found in the mounds are from. That is immaterial to this project; however, she does delve into detail about what was found. In the Nikke Mound, the iron objects quantified are, “a simple shafthole ax, a simple socketed celt, a single edge sword tip, the base of a fragment of a scabbard, and iron ring, and fragmentary iron rods,” (Forsyth 2009). Due to corrosion, it is impossible to determine what some of the unknown fragments are; furthermore, the activity of later grave robbers make it hard to determine whether or not this is the complete collection of grave goods.

Furthermore, in Shintoku 1, there was a, “sword fragment, a spear tip, an earring, and a whetstone,” and besides ceramics, Shintoku 2 had only 2 earrings (Forsyth 2009). There is no indication that these two tombs were robbed. The goods found in the mound are generally indivisible, with the exception of the masses of pottery.<sup>9</sup>

### **III. Which is it?**

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<sup>8</sup> Much to my dismay, many of these studies are in Japanese.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the data does not affirm much given the small sample size (3), but it at the very least does not reject my explanation. More data needs to be collected in the future.

To reiterate the question pressed earlier; does this practice mitigate internal or external conflict? The conditions that are necessary for a practice similar to the Viking burial goods are present. For most of the timespan investigated above, there was either no state or a weak state depending on where one was in Japan (Forsyth 2009). Some were tribal confederacies and others were principalities, so there is no central state to make policy, likely leading to a lack of formal regulations determining inheritance. No written edicts existed until the end of the Kofun era (Forsyth 2009).

In the dawn of the *Yayoi* period, the practice of burial mounds began. Alongside the practice, there were technological advancements, which enabled stratification to occur. This is relevant because the stratification allowed the proliferation of assets that the previous *Jomon* period did not exhibit. The proliferation of assets invariably leads to the decision over what to do with the resources once the owner dies something that people did not always have to worry about; therefore, it generates potential conflict, leading to conspicuous wealth destruction like in the case of Viking burial mounds becoming more of a likelihood.

Conflict more likely increased as well due to higher rates of immigration onto the island and possibly because of some type of environmental or population cataclysm or issue that led to the halving of the population; thereby, leading to a general increase in transaction costs, therefore, relatively less secure property rights. This would lead to the adoption of more informal norms to govern relationships (Ellickson 1991).

Money did not exist for most of this time. In fact, the general decline of the use of burial mounds corresponds with the advent of money and an organized administrative state.

Again, this gives weight to the Viking explanation. We also know that the mounds were constructed after the death of a person (Lu 2005, p 12), implying it is a more personal matter rather than an attempt to mitigate external conflict.

However, it is unclear why the large amounts of pottery were deposited into the mounds in that we have data for (Forsyth 2009). It may be related to the idea of conspicuous wealth destruction in order to prevent external predation. If a hole is already being dug for a body, it might be beneficial to destroy the grave goods now rather than later. Or, what I think is more attractive explanation, is that a death of a person with assets like a chieftain or soldier might provoke an invasion. If a chieftain or warrior dies, the village is put at risk. This would encourage the people to dump additional valuable goods unrelated to inheritance disputes into the mound. This would explain the discrepancy of the goods within the mounds.

With some important modifications, it is likely that the explanation for Japanese burial mounds is caused by the same factors that drove Vikings to bury goods with their dead. However, there are other types of mounds which do not fit this description, the giant keyhole shaped mounds. The keyhole shaped mounds are the scale of pyramids, taking up a great amount of space and containing many burial goods (Hane 1972, pp 18-19; UNESCO 2019). These mounds were constructed primarily for emperors and royalty (Tsutsui 2007, pp 13-14, 22). This variant of burial mound only amount to 49 mounds, with at least 161,560 mounds in Japan, this makes up a small fraction of them. The Colin and Harris (2020) explanation seems to fit the circular mound phenomenon, but the large keyhole-shaped mounds are not as easily explainable. This, however, does not cause

problems with the explanation given thus far. The two kinds of mounds are drastically different, and the one I have been explaining so far is by far the most common of the two and coincides with all of the institutional changes mentioned so far.

The keyhole shaped mounds appeared during the *Kofun* period and went out of existence when the *Kofun* period came to a close. Notably, the beginning of the *Kofun* period is populated by at least 100 nations warring with each other for dominance, and as time progressed, the state slowly became more centralized until the end of the period, also bringing to an end the keyhole shaped mounds. This may be entirely attached to the practice of war. Given that the tombs were constructed with entryways, it is likely that the leaders of the various nations kept their goods in the tomb in order to deter invasion and were eventually buried with the goods to ensure no conflict over the goods after his death. It is even estimated that it took close to 20 years to construct some of these large burial mounds (Totman 2005, p 51), implying that the construction might have happened during the life of the emperor it was for.

The end of the keyhole shaped tombs is likely to have been caused by the unified state definitively forming by the end of the period. It was probably quickened by the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, which was being used as a political tool for centralization (Henshall 2004, p 17). Buddhism was tied into the imperial family, so the growth of the central state in the hands of the imperial family was greatly enabled as Buddhism grew and became more widespread (Henshall 2004, p 17). In order to pledge fealty to stronger nations, chieftains and other royalty would build Buddhist temples on their land, demonstrating their commitment (Totman 2005, p 58). This is essentially an

alternative to the practice of constructing giant mounds. Joining the universalist religion of the stronger leader and sinking investment into a new temple for said religion would protect the assets of the ruler and signal commitment to the suzerain.

One could further ask, “Why keyhole shaped?”. There is much we do not know about the religious mores of the people at the time of the construction of these mounds, but the keyhole might have some religious significance. But, one could answer this by saying that given the third law of demand, people will maximize the quality of the good given a higher price. Larger mounds should be expected to exhibit relatively more artistic direction given the significantly higher cost of building them.

Ultimately, both the regular circular mound and the later, grander keyhole shaped mounds are explained by the same general economic phenomenon of conspicuous wealth destruction in order to provide for security. The more common circular mounds were constructed to settle inheritance disputes and avoid external predation during times of weakness, and the keyhole shaped mounds could have been a method of royalty of protecting their assets from predation in the present life and taking it with him to the grave, providing the people with stability and security.

#### **IV. Why Mounds?**

The question of why mounds were used as a method of wealth destruction is important. Why not just burn the goods? The easy response is that dirt has less alternative uses than wood. The opportunity cost of using dirt to destroy the goods is very low indeed. Not only that, but since someone is already being buried, it might just be expedient to bury their goods with them rather than find some other way to destroy the goods.

## V. Alternative Explanations

### *Potlatch*

Commonplace in mainstream explanations of wealth-destroying cultural norms, potlatch attempts to frame the practice of Kofun burial mound construction in the rational choice framework. The theory states that these mounds were constructed in order to signal to potential invaders that the people within the jurisdiction were wealthy enough to repel enemy forces. Such an explanation seems attractive at first, but it fails on a few accounts.

If they wanted to signal their wealth, why would they not fund the construction of something visually appealing? We know this is possible due to the existence of keyhole shaped burial mounds throughout Japan. Most, however, are not visually appealing. They are simply giant mounds of dirt. Dirt has very few alternative uses, so using it as a signal of wealth would be largely ineffective. So, what would that signal about the wealth of a given people? Absolutely nothing. Furthermore, why are people buried in the mounds? If the mounds were constructed primarily for signaling the wealth of a people to nearby jurisdictions, then we would expect to find mounds with nobody buried in them at all. Such a thing does not exist. The construction of the mounds always succeed the death of a person, and one person is almost always and exclusively buried in the mound.<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, the potlatch theory is more applicable to the large keyhole shaped mounds. The keyhole shaped mounds are large, impressive public works. However, the fact that goods are stored in the mounds and emphasis is placed in protecting the mound

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<sup>10</sup> I have yet to read anything that confirms the Japanese myths regarding other people who are buried with emperors. As far as I can tell, there is typically only one person buried in each mound.



proves that the point of the mound is not to flaunt wealth, but provide security. If the builders of the mounds wanted to flaunt their wealth, why would they want to protect the mound? Allow people to vandalize it, so you can flaunt your wealth again and repair. If not that, then why not post guards at the mound instead of using cost effective ways of protecting it? Using cheap methods of protection such as superstition are signals of a lack of wealth rather than an abundance of it.

One could retort, they may just bury their dead in the mound to save resources on digging graves. If this were true, it would be expected that at least some mounds would have more than one person buried in them, and the status of the person buried in the mound would not be so uniform as it is. It would be expected that some people of low status would find their way into the mounds given that the mounds are not primarily meant for burial goods, but this is again, is not the case.

#### *Psychological Explanation*

It is asserted that this practice existed so that elite could show their status after death (Henshall 2004, p 15). However, this fails to answer the “Why?” question. Instead, it states, “people did it because they liked it,” but what benefit does it actually confer? No objective benefit because it is after death. They just prefer it more than other people.

You would not expect this desire to change over time if that were the case, so why did people all of a sudden no longer desire to be remembered after the *Kofun* period ended? If the psychological explanation is right, then it would be expected that people would continue to engage in the practice without sudden starts or sudden stops like it did in history. In light of economic/rational explanations for the practice, the

psychological/irrational/arbitrary explanation should be rejected, especially given the fact there are hundreds of thousands of examples of this across cultures and time. If it only happened a couple times in a 1000 years I might be tempted to accept the psychological explanation.

### *The Kojiki Explanation*

The *Kojiki* explanation is that the mounds were constructed after the death of an emperor and that all of the emperor's attendants were buried around it up to their neck (Henshall 2004, p 6). They apparently screamed for days on end until they died. This has zero archaeological or reliable historical substantiation. The *Kojiki* was written significantly after the fact to legitimize the rulership of Emperor Temmu, and subsequent archaeological investigation has revealed that no such thing happened (Henshall 2004, p 6; Forsyth 2009). However, it is important to note that the *Kojiki* was written through compiling myths and legends from around the archipelago. It is plausible that this is just a myth to inculcate fear into potential grave robbers. Since the whole point of engaging in this norm is to leave assets untouched, such a norm might be needed to deter grave robbers. Despite the *Kojiki* story being false, it gives insight into the norms surrounding it.

### *Religious*

Like the pyramids of Giza, it is theorized that the burial mounds were constructed and goods were placed in them so that the dead would be accompanied into the afterlife with their wealth. This, however, is misapplied. In fact, the prevailing attitude of the time was that there was nothing after death, and everyone went on to the "land of darkness"

(Hane 1972, p 25). Why would such a norm of grave goods persist over such a long period of time if you believed you could not bring goods into the afterlife? It simply would not.

Even if this were true, it still begs the question of why such a belief would even be practiced in the first place. It is one thing to say somebody did something because it is their religion, but it is another thing to ask what causes and constrains religion? It is not simply arbitrary personal preference. The evidence is clear that institutional constraints determined the beginning and end of the use of burial mounds in Japan, and religion cannot be the thing which explains it. Religion is endogenous to the analysis. It is the thing being explained.

### *Glory to the Dead*

“They thus constituted permanent, awe-inspiring testaments to the glory of their occupants,” (Totman 2005, p 51). This is assuming that the occupants command a lot of glory. It assumes that they were actually admired by the people. On the same page, Totman (2005, p 51) seems to acknowledge that he is unsure of who the rulers during this time actually were. It is relatively unknown except for vague clues based on inaccurate or unreliable accounts. Their glory is obscure to us. It is an assumption that is made about them through imputing backwards through time what we think we know about giant monuments.

The truth is that nobody knows. The fact that the *Kojiki* got it wrong solidifies this point (Henshall 2004, p 6). Not even the people who were around after the conclusion of the Kofun period knew what the purpose of the burial mounds were. Why would it matter to the dead that they were being glorified? They are dead. Unless the promise of post-death

glorification causes pre-death wealth maximization, then this would not be a very good explanation. It is not apparent to me that something like that is happening.,

### *Imported Norm*

Another theory is that it is an imported norm from another country (Forsyth 2009). Forsyth (2009) notes that *kofuns* spread from China to Korea and eventually to Japan. This may very well be the case, but there must be underlying social conditions for the norm to perpetuate in Japan in the first place. If not, it would cease to be practiced. The norm quickly went away when social conditions changed at the end of the *Kofun* period, so if it were not for the social conditions enabling it from the beginning, it would have never gained traction.

It is true that the practice of tomb construction in other Asian countries may have influenced the Japanese; however, it would not have gained traction if the Japanese did not need the norm. The knowledge from the Koreans and ultimately the Chinese improved the institutional knowledge of the Japanese, enabling them to more easily handle the problems caused by high transaction costs. To the contrary, Japan may not have needed this to begin with considering the norms of mound building is not that complicated and seems to be practiced all around the world in primitive or prehistoric cultures. Either the neighboring Koreans merely enhanced the transition to burial mounds or they were ineffective in solely promoting the tradition all together, but they did not cause it.

## **VI. Ancillary Issues**

A common object found in conjunction with the burial mounds are clay figurines that encircle the mounds either called *dotaku* or *haniwa*. These clay figurines are

representative of entities that the Japanese people used to believe in. There is a rational choice explanation for this as well.

Encircling the mounds with these figurines mimics a wall. It may be an equivalent to putting guard posts up. It is likely that the creators of these mounds, whether they knew it or not, were using superstition to guard the mounds and their contents. Given the rational choice explanation of conspicuous wealth destruction, it may be necessary for the mound builders to place additional checks on the potential grave robbers.

Leaving the mounds unprotected leaves them vulnerable to opportunism. However, guarding the burial mounds would be an extremely costly endeavor given the sheer number of them. The monitoring costs are immensely high; therefore, economization is needed in the form of superstitions such as these.<sup>11</sup>

These figurines were later replaced by mirrors, but do not be deceived; this was part of a religious change. Beliefs were shifting toward a religious cult regarding deities which inhabit mirrors, not figurines (Sansom 1958, p 22; Walker 2015, pp 20-21). Other forces may have driven the introduction of a cult, but the mirrors still performed the same function as the *haniwa*.

In addition to the *haniwa*, the keyhole-shaped Kofun were usually surrounded by moats of water (Totman 2005, p 51). This is an obvious effort to prevent predation upon the burial sites. All of these measures to prevent predation, the superstitions, the moats, the mounds themselves, demonstrate the importance of keeping the goods buried underneath

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<sup>11</sup> Out-of-date cultural norms may be why the mounds have not been widely excavated.

the ground, untouched. If there was no general social benefit in a good being in the ground, then there would not have been such extensive precautions taken to prevent graverobbers.

## **VII. Conclusion**

In the words of the great Carl Menger, “All things are subject to the law of cause and effect,” (2011). The same is true for cultural practices such as Japanese burial mounds. Given the current literature on the topic of conspicuous wealth destruction, the Japanese burial mounds phenomenon fits in more or less perfectly. The conditions laid out met and exceeded the requirements in Harris and Kaiser (2020), along with historical/institutional conditions being perfect for the proliferation of this practice.

Furthermore, I added into the analysis the a mix of both internal and external predation mitigation as a motivation for the regular burial mounds. As for the large keyhole shaped mounds, it is clear that political factors drove it into popularity and eventually out along with the introduction of Buddhism into Japan.

I responded to a number of critiques, among them: potlatch, glorification of the dead, religious, punishment, and psychological.

This paper expands the theory of conspicuous wealth destruction theory. Furthermore, it provides an example of a norm in which conspicuous wealth destruction prevents internal and external predation as well as dealing with a long-debated topic in Japanese history. Lastly, it gives yet another example of people cooperating with one another to provide security without the state. Further research must be done in prehistoric and ancient Japan, especially in regard to state formation.

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