

Empowering through the mundane: royal women's households in twelfth and thirteenth century Japan

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Abstract: This paper argues that commodities such as blinds, flooring materials, and food supplies are valuable historical sources for understanding the power of Heian and Kamakura royal women. Vases and bowls excavated from the Noto Peninsula, for example, show that Premier Royal Lady Kōkamon-in (1122–1181) played an important role during the twelfth century in starting Suzu stoneware production at her Wakayama Estate and stimulated interregional commerce. From this growing industry, she gained economic benefits and strengthened her political networks. Another contemporary female landlord, Senyōmon-in (1181–1252), implemented a due-collection plan for obtaining material objects that maintained the livelihood of her palace. Mundane items including household furnishing articles supported her economic well being while buttressing her political and cultural influence over the course of her life. By collecting various items from her estates, such as blinds, curtains, and mats, she supported her adopted children and widened her human networks. With the effective use of such material goods, she could seek political allies and align with leading courtiers who participated in decision-making meetings at court. As a whole, the above case studies show that series of innocuous data such as excavated ceramic pieces and recorded object types can be used to reveal a level of significant cultural, political, and religious influence.

Keywords: medieval Japan, Asian history, royal women, *nyoin*, gender, materials, primary sources, Heian, Kamakura

Blinds, ceramics, and cushions were commodities crucial for everyday life in Heian and Kamakura Japan (794–1333). Noble women and men sat on straw mats with patterned fringes, situating themselves in spaces divided by curtains and blinds. A wide range of objects, such as ceramic pots, tray tables, incense

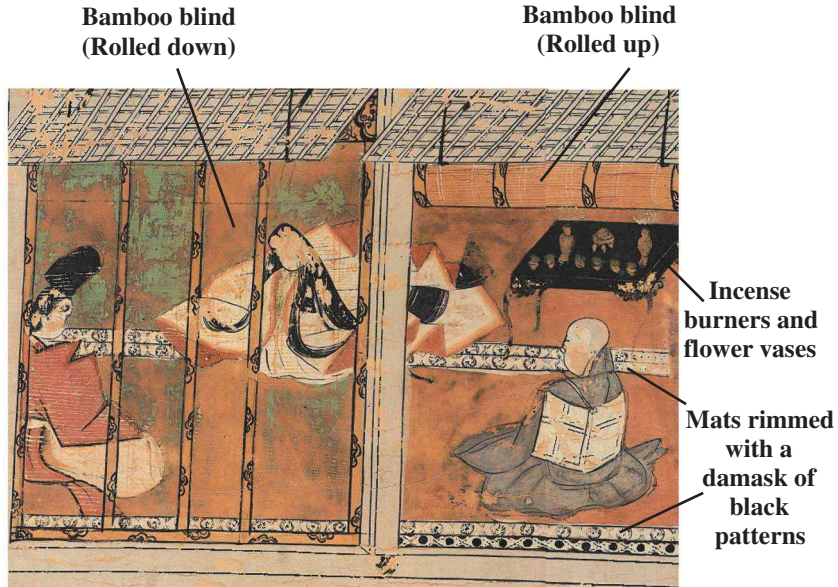


Figure 1. Household materials depicted in *Genji monogatari emaki* (Komatsu 1979).

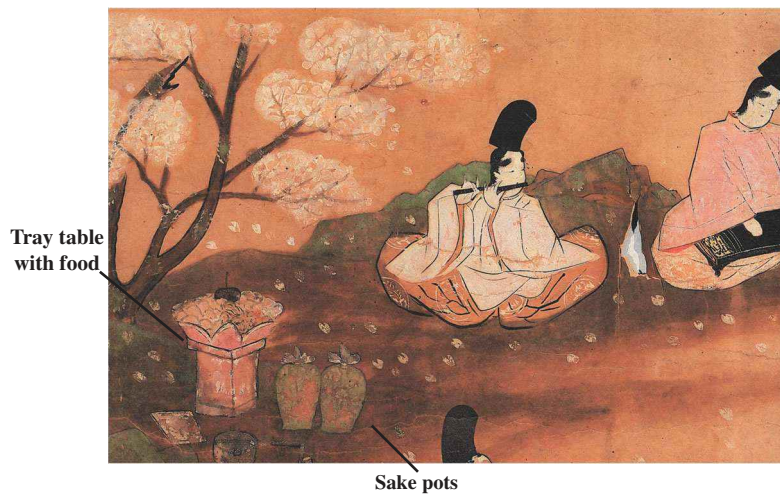


Figure 2. Household materials depicted in *Genji monogatari emaki* (Komatsu 1979).

burners, and flower vases supported both secular and religious activities (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)). As these materials were often produced outside the Heian Capital, and some of them, such as Chinese ceramics and medicines, were even brought from other parts of Asia, we must wonder: how did the nobles in the capital obtain these goods?

One of the means to acquire material goods was to hold estate rights. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, power holders such as royals, prestigious aristocrats, and religious institutions had strong rights over landed estates and supported their households with resources collected from those estates. An often forgotten but important fact during this period is that royal women—wives and daughters of a monarch—inherited large land portfolios and independently oversaw them. Additionally, these female landlords often adopted the offspring of other powerful households, which expanded their human networks (Kawai 2021; Kawai 2018, 292).

Yet while there are valuable studies examining male estate proprietors' goods production and distribution networks, scholarship on female estate proprietors' activities in this area is lacking. This was partially because until the end of the twentieth century, scholarship of Japanese history had erroneously defined royal women as titular landlords who were under the control of a patriarchal figure of the royal family—a senior retired monarch (Maki 1983, 2–3; Kokushi daijiten henshū iinkai 1984, 371–373).¹ In this paper, I argue that twelfth and thirteenth century Japanese royal women used their estates to gain material resources in order to develop political, economic, and religious power. Through exploring material objects generated from specific local lands, I also show that series of mundane data, such as unearthed stoneware pieces, recorded household items, and listed estate dues, are valuable historical sources to understand complex connections between the power of Heian and Kamakura royal women and their landholding rights.

In the Heian and Kamakura estate system, nobody claimed absolute ownership over an estate (Goodwin and Piggott, xxv–xxviii). Rather, members of the hierarchical estate system shared proceeds by holding certain rights and fulfilling assigned responsibilities over the land. Such rights and responsibilities were called *shiki*. Royal family members, including women, held supreme proprietorships (*honke shiki*), which provided them with the strongest authority, or socio-politically acknowledged rights, over the estates. As supreme proprietors, they decided annual dues, settled disputes within the estates, and appointed different levels of estate officials. These officials included a resident manager who locally managed the estate and a managing proprietor who oversaw the land while presiding in the capital. Such authority, however, did not automatically guarantee them an actual ability to acquire resources from their estates; they had to strategize and plan.

Another important phenomenon of this period is that royal women with sizable land portfolios held the title of premier royal lady (*nyoin*), which was comparable to that of a retired monarch. By receiving the *nyoin* status, a royal woman acquired the authority to establish a large administrative headquarters equipped with officials who helped to manage her extensive landholdings. Although there were dozens of Heian and Kamakura *nyoin* who were supreme

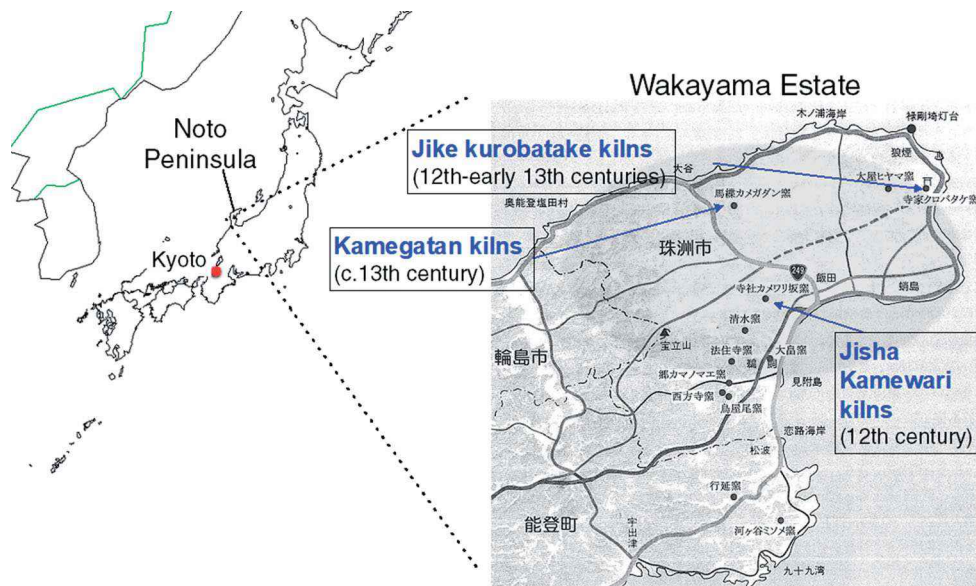


Figure 3. Suzuyaki kilns in Wakayama Estate during the 12th and 13th centuries.

proprieters, I focus on two specific *nyoin*, Kōkamon-in (1122–1181) and Sen'yōmon-in (1181–1252), to offer concrete examples rather than providing a sweeping analysis of many individuals in this short paper. Surviving sources about estates of Kōkamon-in and Sen'yōmon-in allow us to see interesting ties between material goods and complex aspects of premodern women's power.² These women are also representative of the two different types of *nyoin*: Kōkamon-in as a royal wife and Sen'yōmon-in as an unmarried royal daughter.

Kōkamon-in's Wakayama estate and its stoneware

During the mid twentieth century, many Heian and Kamakura kilns were found in today's Suzu City in the Hokuriku region (see Figure 3).³ Through a close analysis of Suzu stoneware (or Suzuyaki), archaeologists argue that a large ceramic industry had started in the estate called Wakayama during the twelfth century (Hirata 2002, 12; Figures 4–6). Assuming that there was little connection between stoneware production and her own economic gain, however, these studies have seldom explored the role of Kōkamon-in who established the estate (Kentani 1981; Yoshioka 1990; Hirata 2002; SKI 2010). Most have instead focused on physical aspects such as the changing styles of the stoneware or the means by which they were circulated. When discussing actual people, previous scholarship tended to highlight men—male estate proprietors and custodians—and their roles in managing this estate (IKRH 2000, 6).

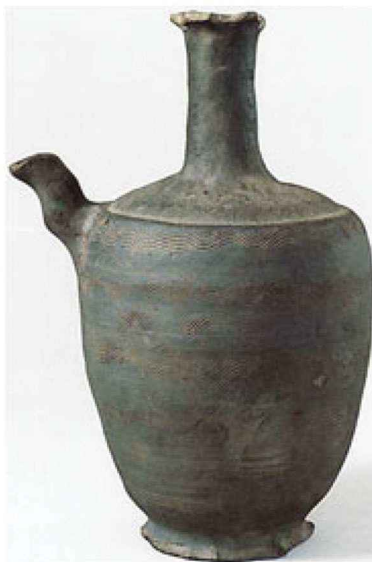


Figure 4. Suzuyaki water bottle (12th century), height: 28.5 cm. The photo and more detailed explanation of the bottle is available in *Suzu no meitō*, (Suzu shiritsu Suzuyaki shiryōkan, 1989, color plate 4, 63).



Figure 5. Suzuyaki Buddha relief (12th century), height: 22.0 cm. The photo and more detailed explanation of the relief is available in *Suzu no meitō*, (Suzu shiritsu Suzuyaki shiryōkan, 1989, color plate 9, 65).

Being the first and only daughter born between Regent Fujiwara no Tadamichi and his official wife Sōshi, Fujiwara no Seishi (later known as Kōkamon-in) grew up with her family's hope that she would attain a queen



Figure 6. Suzuyaki jar with four handles (late 12th century, height: 21.5 cm) archived at the Suzu Ware Museum in Suzu City. This photo is published in *Tōjiki no bunkashi* (Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan [the National Museum of Japanese History] 1998, 25).

consort position and become a royal mother. She indeed met this expectation by marrying Monarch Sutoku (1119–1164, r. 1123–1141) in 1129. Although she did not produce a child, she adopted Prince Narihito (later Monarch Konoe, 1139–1155, r.1141–1155) born to Retired Monarch Toba (1103–1156, r.1107–1123) and Fujiwara no Tokushi (later known by her *nyoin* title, Bifukumon-in, 1117–1160). When her adopted son ascended the throne in 1141, Seishi was elevated to a grand queen-consort. Nine years later, she received her *nyoin* title and became known as Kōkamon-in (Susaki, 1995, 208–217).

Kōkamon-in's life was not always smooth sailing, however. In 1156 a military conflict, later known as Hōgen War, erupted between the faction representing her husband Sutoku and that of his half brother Monarch Go-Shirakawa (1127–1192, r.1155–1158). While Sutoku lost the war and was exiled to a remote province, Kōkamon-in remained in the capital. Historians largely do not question why she was able to do so on the premise that her lofty status as *nyoin* helped her avoid any consequences. This scholarly attitude, however, tends to dismiss other reasons why she could sustain her political standing despite the fact that she was the primary wife of the exiled retired monarch. As previously mentioned, Kōkamon-in did not bear Sutoku's child but adopted Prince Narihito. This might have worked to her advantage because his biological mother, Bifukumon-in, played a critical role supporting the winning side at the aforementioned war (Kawai 2007, 19–32). Additionally, surviving sources show that Kōkamon-in held authority to appoint managing proprietors and custodians of many estates (Kokushi daijiten henshū iinkai 1984, 297–298).⁴ During Heian and Kamakura times, those who oversaw a *nyoin*'s estates also managed her household as female attendants and administrative officials (Higuchi 2008, 34; Kawai 2021, 222, 235–237). Thus Kōkamon-in's followers who had been benefitting from their ties with her and her estates certainly had strong incentives to protect her household in the capital. This suggests that it was important for a *nyoin* to develop mutually beneficial and trusted relationships with her followers who managed her estates.

The aforementioned Wakayama Estate was one of Kōkamon-in's estates that helped her broaden human networks and increased her economic potential. In the early 1140s, when Kōkamon-in (then Seishi) was consolidating her position as a grand queen-consort, she received a letter from one of her officials, Minamoto no Suekane. He expressed his decision to present her a piece of land that he inherited from his father. In return, he wished her to do several things: to establish his land as her private estate, to protect it from potential enemies as the supreme proprietor of the estate, and to appoint him to manage it as a custodian. The grand queen-consort approved Suekane's request and established his land as her private estate in 1143 (*Kujōke monjo*, document 294; IKRH 2000). This establishment of Wakayama estate coincided with the opening of Suzuyaki kilns in the mid twelfth century.

The act of ‘commending’ land to a power holder in the capital, as seen in the case of Suekane, was a strategy used by smaller land owners or developers to protect their properties from potential enemies, such as provincial governors who often tried to levy various land taxes (Segal 2018, 443; Goodwin and Piggott 2018, 468). Being appointed to Wakayama’s custodian post, Suekane continued to manage the estate, but he had to submit annual rents and miscellaneous dues to Kōkamon-in who became the supreme proprietor.

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, historians claimed that central figures like Kōkamon-in were passive receivers of land commendations, but newer studies have shown that these power holders in fact played more active roles in the commendation process. For example Uejima Susumu (1992) and Kawabata Shin (2000) argue that even though a small land piece was commended, it was often established as a new estate encompassing much larger areas. Under the guise of the same estate name, a newly established estate usually included lands that were previously held by different owners, including even those controlled by the central government (Kawabata 2000; Takahashi 2004). Based on the logic that such a large modification was impossible without the involvement of royals or aristocrats who could impact court decisions, I argue that Kōkamon-in’s role in transforming Suekane’s land into her new estate, Wakayama, was more crucial than previous scholarship has claimed.

Despite Uejima and Kawabata emphasizing a supreme proprietor’s role in establishing a new estate, most historians have remained silent about ties between Kōkamon-in’s power and her estate’s flagship industry of Suzuyaki based on the fact that few Suzuyaki pieces have been excavated in Kyoto. Some scholars have also argued that Kyoto dwellers did not acquire heavy items like ceramics from Wakayama Estate because areas closer to the capital, such as Tōkai and the eastern Seto Inland Sea regions, produced similar products (Yoshioka 1989, 1994). Through a close analysis of written and archaeological records, however, I propose the possibility that Kōkamon-in supported the Suzuyaki industry at its initial stage and promoted its further development.

Considering the size of Suzuyaki production, it is difficult to believe that the supreme proprietor remained ignorant of the industry and benefited nothing from it. Excavations in 1986 and 1992, for example, revealed that the size of the Suzuyaki industry during Kōkamon-in’s time was larger than previously assumed. Within the Jike Kurobatake site, at least thirteen kilns were in operation between the mid-twelfth and the mid-thirteenth centuries, proving that the operation significantly grew under her proprietorship (IKMBS 1994; Maekawa 1998; SKI 2010).

Such rapid growth also suggests that Kōkamon-in’s managing proprietor, custodian, and estate officials collaborated at both capital and local levels to establish its industrial foundation. Under twelfth and thirteenth century customs, a capital-based managing proprietor had to develop and maintain a

communication pipeline between the supreme proprietor (the *nyoin*) and her estate, by dispatching deputies to the local site on a regular basis, collecting estate dues, assuring productivity, and solving local problems. To support a visit of such deputies, local estate managers and residents provided accommodations, threw banquets, and covered the costs for their return trip to the capital (Morimoto 2008). These visitors were given local specialties as gifts for themselves and capital-based proprietors. Therefore it was highly probable that Kōkamon-in received at least a small amount of Suzuyaki as a souvenir from her Wakayama residents.

Here, it is important to analyze an often overlooked relation between material goods and adoptions. The practice of “adoption” (*yōshi* or *yūshi*) served different political purposes, ranging from an adoptee’s career advancement at court to a warlord’s hostage exchange (Conlan 2005, Morgan 2015). By adopting children of powerful households, Heian and Kamakura *nyoin* certainly widened their political networks, but they also gained opportunities to acquire material goods from areas within and outside the capital. Despite limited examples, one late twelfth-century pot excavated from the Heian capital site shows that some Suzuyaki made their way to the capital from Wakayama Estate. The pot was found within the remains of Prince Mochihito’s residence (Yoshioka 1994, 605–606). The prince likely received Suzuyaki through his connection with his adoptive mother, Hachijō-in, who owned an estate next to Kōkamon-in’s Wakayama (Teishitsu rinyakyoku 1937, 151; HCSS 1991, 998). But it is also possible that Hachijō-in obtained the pot directly through her connection with Kōkamon-in because these women had close familial and political ties. Kōkamon-in had adopted Hachijō-in’s full brother and formed a political alliance with her mother (Kawai 2021, 35, 152–153). Moreover Kōkamon-in’s half brother Kujō Kanezane, whom she appointed to the highest managing post of Wakayama to take care of collecting estate dues, closely served Hachijō-in (Gomi 1991, 46–47; Nomura 2006, 119–122).

Another example of Suzuyaki reaching Kyoto is a ‘blackish earthen cup’ used at the twenty-seventh day memorial service after Kōkamon-in’s death in 1181 (*Gyokuyō*, Jishō 4[1180]/5/15). Kanezane explained that he precisely selected this cup in place of a black-lacquered dish (*Gyokuyō*, Yōwa 1[1181]/12/18, Umekawa 1997, 414–415).⁵ According to Yoshioka Yasunobu (1990, 295–296) and Hirata Tenshū (2002, 11), Suzuyaki sake bottles were often manufactured by emulating lacquerware. Twelfth century Kamegatan kilns in Wakayama Estate, for example, produced “dark black and hard” stoneware that was like lacquerware. Furthermore, Hirata argues that a twelfth-century sake bottle excavated from Yōzen Temple, which was once part of Wakayama Estate, was likely an imitation of lacquerware. These discoveries strengthen the possibility that the cup was actual Suzuyaki.

Additionally, a supposition posited by previous scholars—ceramics like stoneware were heavy, so proprietors did not request them as estate dues—is not necessarily true. Other contemporary estate proprietors annually received ceramic from the same region where Wakayama stood. Sen'yōmon-in, whose case will be introduced shortly, collected cooking appliances and dishware including pots, bowls, and plates from her estates in Hokuriku. She originally ordered her estates in the Seto Inland region to submit jars and bowls, but she later exempted them altogether. In contrast, she continued to receive similar items from her estates in Hokuriku, showing a stable production capacity of ceramics in that region.⁶ Sen'yōmon-in's example refutes the argument that Heian and Kamakura estate proprietors did not systematically order their Hokuriku estates to submit stoneware due to the weight of such products and the remoteness of the estates. It is also important to note that Sen'yōmon-in annually ordered only a few pots and bowls each year. If Kōkamon-in also annually received a limited amount of Suzuyaki from Wakayama Estate, it is not surprising to find few of their remains in Kyoto.

Even if Wakayama Estate residents did not send a large number of Suzuyaki wares to Kyoto, they would have almost certainly traded Suzuyaki for other items required as estate dues. According to archaeological evidence, a number of Suzuyaki wares, including pots, bottles, and vases, travelled across the Japan Sea and reached distant areas such as the Seto Inland Sea coastlines and the southern part of Hokkaidō (Kentani 1981, 30; Hirata 2002; SKI 2010). They were also found in Hiraizumi within Ōshū of northern Honshū. If traders brought Suzuyaki to Ōshū, they had to make a profit by exchanging the stoneware for something else. Since Ōshū was known for its alluvial gold production, gold could be one of such items (Furiya 2002, 24; Watanabe 2010, 234–236). Contemporaries used gold to support different events such as seasonal refurbishments of their mansions and religious ceremonies.⁷ For example, royals and aristocrats often provided gold as offerings at Buddhist events (*Shōyūki*, Eien 1[987]3/6[TDSH 1987]; *Taiki*, Ninpei 3[1153]/9/17 [Zōho shiryō taisei kankōkai, 1965; Yoshihiko & Hiromichi 1976]; *Inokuma kanpakuki*, Antei 2 [1228]/11/22 [TDSH 1972; Smits 2019]). Kōkamon-in, who sponsored a number of Buddhist ceremonies after becoming a *nyoin*, must have needed gold and likely acquired it through trading goods from her estates.⁸

To satisfy local and inter-regional demands, I believe that Kōkamon-in, her capital-based officials, local estate managers, and Wakayama Estate Suzuyaki makers, had worked hand in glove to develop its stoneware production. As mentioned earlier, Kōkamon-in worked together with one of her officials, Suekane, to establish Wakayama as her estate. Suekane and his son, Suenaga, served Kōkamon-in and her heirs as household officials (*Chūyūki*, Daiji 5/2/27; Maki 1993, 160). Suekane's sons, grandsons, and likely his daughters,

continued to serve Kōkamon-in. By guaranteeing custodianship to Sukekane's family, she consolidated a mutual trust with them. In return she expected them to manage her estate well and maintain their loyalty to her; and as far as they met her satisfaction, she protected the estate, its industry, and their jobs in the capital.

Considering these factors, I disagree with the assumption that Kōkamon-in had little to do with the actual estate management or knew nothing about the growing industry in her Wakayama Estate. She held rights to appoint estate officials as the supreme proprietor and could even fire them if she found their jobs unsatisfactory or found them lacking in loyalty.⁹ This meant that her estate custodians and managers wanted to impress her rather than taking a risk of losing their job by concealing the economic development of the estate.

By supporting the economy of Wakayama Estate and Suzuyaki production for domestic and international trade, Kōkamon-in expanded opportunities to enhance her cultural and economic power. Despite declining state-sponsored trade, the flow of foreign goods from China and the continent "developed and prospered in the latter part of the Heian period" (Saeki 2009, 164). As Yoshioka points out, Suzuyaki incorporated styles and techniques from multiple East Asian cultural zones such as the Ryūkyū Islands and the continent.¹⁰ The tree-branch patterns inscribed on Suzuyaki show influences from the Korean Peninsula. Suzu makers and traders actively interacted with broader cultural networks when developing the Suzu industry on Wakayama Estate (Yoshioka 1994, 568; Yoshioka 2010, 29). This shows that the world of Kōkamon-in was not confined to her capital residence.

Another aspect of Suzuyaki I want to emphasize is its religious usage. A wide range of Suzuyaki objects excavated from Wakayama Estate and other parts of the archipelago were used to support Buddhist and local beliefs. These material items included water bottles used for Buddhist rituals, containers buried with copied sutras, five wheeled stūpas, and Buddhist stoneware reliefs (Yoshioka 1989, 111–113; Sekine 2004; Figure 5). A lack of written records about such Suzuyaki items makes it difficult to reveal how exactly they were used, but I still want to offer a hypothesis by connecting available sources. For example, previous studies point out that the Suzuyaki reliefs look similar to a Buddha triad relief depicted in the grave scene of the twelfth-century Hungry Ghosts Scroll. The scroll conveys a Buddhist teaching that the deceased, including one's family members, may have turned into hungry spirits and been suffering, but living beings can save them by entreating the mercy of Buddha. The resemblance of the Suzu relief to that of the scroll therefore indicates a significant religious role supported by the Suzuyaki industry, especially in appeasing pains that individuals might encounter in their afterlives (Moriuchi 2010, 4).¹¹

Furthermore, the Suzuyaki industry developed close ties with local religious authorities, such as Hōjūji, the Buddhist temple presiding in the middle of Wakayama Estate. The Hino family, whose successive scions served Kōkamon-in as her household officials, made Hōjūji as their vow temple in the late twelfth century (HCSS 1991, 979). In its precinct, Hakusan Shrine, which originated from a local religious movement, increased in popularity during the Heian and Kamakura periods (Yoshioka 2010, 25). According to archaeological evidence, the temple built kilns and contributed to the Suzuyaki expansion. In 1267 Hino Sukenobu commended some lands to the Healing Buddha Hall at Hōjūji to support rituals praying for the supreme proprietor (Kōkamon-in's heirs) and his own family who acted as the managing proprietor (IKRH 2000, 8; Yoshioka 2010, 25). Although this source was written after Kōkamon-in's death, it is highly possible that the Hino family gained rights to manage Wakayama Estate under her proprietorship because they started expanding their political networks while serving Kōkamon-in as her household officials.

With the use of existing written and archaeological records, this case study shows the possibility that Kōkamon-in, her officials, and estate residents supported each other to develop the Suzuyaki industry. Instead of presuming that the female landholder in the capital was disconnected from her distant estate and its economic development, I have explored the possibility that she and her followers gained economic, political, and religious power by cooperatively participating in its management. Specifically the Suzuyaki production, trading activities, and religious rituals in Wakayama suggest that through her estates, Kōkamon-in developed a wide range of human networks. I believe that such networks not only provided her with economic power but also helped her sustain her position at court even during political turmoil.

Sen'yōmon-in's household items and her political networks

As shown in the case of Kōkamon-in, questioning previous assumption helps us investigate royal women's power gained through material production from their estates. I will further explore the importance of re-analyzing existing primary sources from a fresh perspective through the case of another *nyōin*, Sen'yōmon-in. She was a daughter of Retired Monarch Go-Shirakawa and Takashina no Eishi (?–1216). As her maternal grandfather was a Buddhist monk of no rank, Sen'yōmon-in lacked strong support from her mother's natal family. Furthermore, being the youngest child of Go-Shirakawa, who had many other children from different women, she had a weak political standing at court during her early life; she spent almost a decade without receiving any official recognition or status as Go-Shirakawa's princess. Only a few years before her father's death, however, she began advancing in court ranks and

ultimately received a title of premier royal lady in 1191. On his death bed Go-Shirakawa made this eleven-year-old daughter the heir to his Rokujō Palace in the capital and transferred to her a set of eighty-nine estates supporting the property. Like Kōkamon-in's Wakayama Estate, most of these estates were far from Kyoto and scattered across the Japanese archipelago (Kawai 2021, 95–96).

To analyze the relationship between Sen'yōmon-in's power and the material goods obtained from her estates, I used a primary source that I call *The List of Rokujō Palace Estates*.¹² Despite the significant information that can be garnered from *The List*, nobody has closely analyzed it from an understanding of women's power. One possible reason was that its seemingly mundane nature made *The List* look to be quite a challenging source to use. It consists of two scrolls, almost 25 meters long in total, listing estate names and miscellaneous dues in a very matter-of-fact manner. Few historians saw it as a gold mine that could easily produce exciting new arguments. Second, most historians considered that Sen'yōmon-in's father created *The List* and transferred the due-collecting plan to her as an inheritance package (Ōyama 1987, 18). Based on this, previous scholarship missed the potential of *The List* for studying the connection between Sen'yōmon-in's power and material resources.

Two aspects of *The List* actually contradict the assumption that the document was created by Go-Shirakawa. First, *The List* includes the dues collected for a memorial service held on his death anniversary each year, naming the ritual 'The Eight Lotus Sutra Lectures of the Third Month.' He died on the seventeenth day of the third month, and this information could not have been known until he had actually passed away. Additional evidence comes from comments inserted into the document, which explain when certain estates started paying new dues or stopped submitting existing dues. Along with these comments, *The List* mentions that some of these changes occurred 'during the time of Go-Shirakawa.' In contrast, it never uses Sen'yōmon-in or other proprietors after her as a reference. It is important to note here that in Heian and Kamakura Japan, a reigning or retired monarch's name was a posthumously employed title and thereby was not used to refer him while he was still living. Furthermore, contemporary writers usually omit information obvious to their expected readers. Based on the above reasons, I argue that *The List* and its additional notes were written after the time of Go-Shirakawa but not later than the tenure of his successor Sen'yōmon-in.

A remaining question is—how could an eleven year old manage estates? Here, the concept of a corporate body is useful (Kantorowicz 1957; Greenblatt 2009). Right before her father's death, Sen'yōmon-in achieved *nyoin* status. Receiving a *nyoin* title was advantageous because it allowed her to establish an independent administrative office large enough to manage many estates. What she needed was to gain supporters who were capable of running her office and

maintaining her estates. Her physical body was that of an eleven-year old, but the institutional apparatus and the rights she inherited over the estates provided her with authority that attracted people to support her. Located in her Rokujō Palace, the *nyoin* administrative office helped Sen'yōmon-in oversee her newly inherited estates and develop her due collection plan.

Specifically according to *The List*, the material goods collected from Sen'yōmon-in's estates played important roles in consolidating ties between the *nyoin* and her followers. Throughout her life, she regularly received powerful royals and courtiers as guests at her palace, including retired monarchs, queen-consorts, regents, and their heirs. In this context, seemingly superficial matters such as renewing household materials were important. By providing an appropriate setting for welcoming guests, she could show her respect to influential members at court while also demonstrating her economic power and buttressing her image as a useful ally. These material resources not only signified her wealth but also supported her *nyoin* authority thus reinforcing her political power.

One such household item was bamboo blinds. Since royal or aristocratic mansions in Heian and Kamakura Japan lacked substantial exterior walls, these blinds had an important function. They served to cover the spaces between pillars, separating inside from outside, while allowing the occupants to experience the outside atmosphere. According to *The List*, Sen'yōmon-in's estates submitted two types of bamboo blinds—*misu* (high-quality blinds) and *iyosu* (lighter blinds specially made in Iyo Province)—for her residence (see Figure 1). She and her officials annually requested these blinds prior to the new year and refurbished the Rokujō Palace.

Despite such an arrangement, however, Sen'yōmon-in's authority to demand blinds did not always guarantee actual power to obtain them. According to small notes added later to *The List*, her estates eventually failed to send a full amount of *misu* to her household. Yet if we carefully examine this trend, we see that Sen'yōmon-in was able to collect 79% of prearranged *misu*. Furthermore, her estates continued to submit 50 of the Iyo-style blinds each year, which represented 100% of the prearranged amount. Based on a close analysis of *The List*, I argue that Sen'yōmon-in and her officials used a certain strategy to sustain the high submission rate for decades of her proprietorship. Instead of relying on a small number of estates, they distributed the obligation to submit blinds across many estates, so they could reduce the risk of losing a number of them at once (Kawai 2021, 143–147).

Since *The List* specifies beneficiaries of certain material resources, its due-distribution patterns reveal that the seemingly mundane objects played important roles in consolidating Sen'yōmon-in's relationship with her followers. Curtains, for example, produced appropriate working spaces for her Rokujō Palace officials and attendants. Hung from movable stands, curtains were especially

convenient to divide areas within the house. Each year Sen'yōmon-in requested her estates to submit around thirty curtains in total, including a few used at her own quarters. A majority of them, however, were secured for the Attendant Office where Sen'yōmon-in's male attendants (*saburai*) served. For this Attendant Office she ordered different estates, including Fukagaya, Sakakita, and Nakayama, to submit approximately two dozen curtains every year. Such a high demand of curtains indicates that many *saburai* regularly waited on her at the residence. This may also attest to an extensive array of roles played by Sen'yōmon-in's *saburai*. During Heian and Kamakura times, *saburai* consisted of not only those specialized in military skills but also officials with high literary and accounting skills, serving in noble households. Nakahara Toshiaki (1979) argues that the jobs of *saburai* in fact covered a wide range of services—storing materials sent from estates, maintaining security, procuring food, and supervising material production. Depending on their tasks, Sen'yōmon-in's *saburai* were divided into groups and likely worked together. Having enough curtains at her Attendant Office helped them create separate areas for different purposes as needed, such as drafting documents, holding meetings, and even resting between duties. By regularly renewing and providing a sufficient number of curtains to her *saburai*, Sen'yōmon-in demonstrated how she valued their roles in developing, maintaining, and guarding her interests.

Additionally, Sen'yōmon-in and her officials made sure to support the livelihood of her close relatives, including her mother, Eishi, who was called 'Lady of the Second Rank.' According to *The List*, Sen'yōmon-in annually collected curtains from her Nomi Estate and renovated her mother's bathroom. *The List* also recorded dues for someone designated as '*miya*,' which was an honorific epithet meaning either a royal offspring or a queen-consort. Although specific individuals who received these items changed over the years, '*miya*' mostly referred to Sen'yōmon-in's adopted children.¹³ One was Monarch Go-Toba's son, Prince Masanari (1200–1255), whom she adopted in 1200 just after his birth. Another was a daughter of Regent Fujiwara no Iezane, Chōshi (1218–1275). To provide sufficient support for these adopted children, Sen'yōmon-in procured resources from her estates. For example, her estates such as Kamikadoma and Abu annually submitted curtains for the living quarters of her *miya*. According to *The List*, the material should be made of 'delicately woven beautiful cloth' with 'leather straps attached.' For two seasonal renewals, Sen'yōmon-in collected straw mats from her estates to renovate their rooms. In the fourth month Ijira Estate submitted two straw mats rimmed with small-patterned damask, and in the tenth month Shimokatsura and Kuga estates submitted four straw mats of the same style. In addition to these materials, to support her *miya*'s outings Sen'yōmon-in summoned laborers from Noguchi Estate.

Adopting children was an effective strategy that Sen'yōmon-in used to widen human networks and consolidate political influence at court. This reflected

contemporary customs. As suggested by the cases of Kōkamon-in and others, Heian and Kamakura *nyoin* often adopted royal or regental children born from mothers of lower socio-political status. These women surely promoted the political and economic standings of their adopted children, but they too benefitted from such adoptions because they established ties with influential households and increased their own visibility at court. Such a strategy was especially crucial for Sen'yōmon-in to maintain her political power because being never-married and childless, she differed from other premier royal ladies who had married a monarch and given birth to royal heirs. This difference placed her at a competitive disadvantage in the political spectrum, but by adopting children of other power holders at court, she was able to broaden her networks.

One significant characteristic of *The List* is that it includes additional small notes notifying which dues had been failing to reach the Rokujō Palace or were eventually exempted. Although such notes should indicate changing demands, they did not always reflect reality and instead suggest provisioning strategies employed by Sen'yōmon-in and her officials. For example, she continued to request curtains for the 'Lady of the Second Rank' although Eishi had left the Rokujō residence sometime after Go-Shirakawa's death. This could have been because of a high possibility that someone else with the similar rank would take up residence at the Rokujō Palace. In fact, Sen'yōmon-in adopted Prince Masanari whose biological mother, Fujiwara no Jūshi (1182–1264), held the junior second rank (TDSH 1981, 938). She would have visited her son at the Rokujō palace when Sen'yōmon-in sponsored events for the prince.¹⁴ Then, Jūshi was the most likely recipient of the curtains collected for the 'Lady of the Second Rank' during the early 1200s.

Similarly, regardless of the period when no one called '*miya*' lived at the Rokujō Palace, the dues for the '*miya*' remained on *The List*. Again, the reason behind this was a high possibility that someone of this status, possibly from among her adopted children, lived at the Rokujō, and it was necessary to maintain resources for that person. For example, two decades after Sen'yōmon-in adopted Masanari, he was exiled due to his father's downfall in the Jōkyū War in 1221. As explained above, however, she later adopted a daughter of the regent, Chōshi. This adopted daughter maintained a close tie with her adoptive mother, and even after becoming a queen-consort of Monarch Go-Horikawa, she held her residence at the Rokujō Palace (*Inokuma kampakuki*, Karoku 1/10/7; Smits, Gregory 2019). By maintaining the '*miya*' dues after losing her previous adopted son Masanari, Sen'yōmon-in was then able to allocate them to support Chōshi for many coming years.

Along with blinds and curtains, Sen'yōmon-in annually collected flooring materials. To accommodate residential buildings that were rarely pre-furnished with flooring, Heian and Kamakura nobles spread removable straw mats and cushions over the wooden floors. The unique feature of such flooring items

was their differing fringes that specified the socio-political status of individual users. According to medieval protocols, the rules for flooring material usage in a secular setting were as follows. The most elevated *ungen* type (rimmed with a damask woven in different colored patterns) was used by the most exalted royal members such as a monarch, retired monarchs, or premier royal ladies. The second *daimon* type (rimmed with a damask of large black patterns) was used by princes or princesses of the blood and senior nobles with ministerial posts. The third *komon* type (rimmed with a damask of small black patterns) was used by senior nobles who had not advanced to ministerial positions. The fourth *murasaki-beri* type (rimmed with purple silk) was used by royal intimates (Shintōtaikei henshūkai 1991; Jingū shichō 1971, 55–57).

From her estates, Sen'yōmon-in collected all four types. With an effective use of these removable 'status markers,' Sen'yōmon-in and her officials flexibly demarcated the residential floor space according to the socio-political standing of her guests, attendants, and others who visited or lived there. *Ungen* was surely used for herself, but she regularly renewed this most dignified type to receive special visitors. For example, she hosted rites of passage for Prince Masanari and welcomed important royals and leading courtiers, including his father Retired Monarch Go-Toba, at the Rokujō Palace (See Footnote 14). There, *ungen* materials played crucial roles in showing her hospitality. By setting areas appropriate for these prestigious guests, she demonstrated her backing for the prince and confirmed her political ties with his relatives.

The second most elevated type, *daimon*, also played important roles in creating proper spaces for Sen'yōmon-in's adopted prince and her minister-level officials who led others in managing the household. For example, Minister of the Right Fujiwara no Kanemasa helped the *nyoin* consolidate her political and economic power after her father's death (*Gyokuyō*, Kenkyū 2/6/26; *Meigetsuki*, Shōji 2/12/21 and Genkyū 1/1/8). Another significant group using *daimon* were high-ranking women. Although protocol handbooks tend to focus on male users, medieval picture scrolls such as *Genji monogatari* attest that royal and aristocratic women often sat on *daimon* materials (see Figures 1 and 2). Specifically at Sen'yōmon-in's palace, her mother was a *daimon* user because she held the second court rank which was equivalent to the rank of a leading minister.

Ungen and *daimon* were important items, but the largest number of collected flooring materials were *komon*; these were suitable for senior nobles with non-ministerial posts. In total, *komon* items constituted 47 percent of all the flooring items recorded on *The List*. Senior nobles were the top echelon of male courtiers who took essential roles in decision-making process at the central government. Although their positions were lower than ministers, those *komon* users consisted of a majority of the senior nobles and thus wielded significant influence at court. Additionally, these courtiers were allowed to have both

Table 1. Six directors of Sen'yōmon-in's administrative headquarters in 1191
(*Gyokuyō*, Kenkyū 2/6/20).

Name	Senior nobles (third ranking or higher)	Ministerial position	Flooring material type
Fujiwara no Kanemasa	YES (senior second rank)	YES (Minister of the Right)	<i>Daimon</i>
Fujiwara no Yorizane	YES (senior second rank)	NO (Provisional Senior Counselor cum Senior Captain of the Right of the Inner Palace Guard)	<i>Komon</i>
Minamoto no Michichika	YES (senior second rank)	NO (Middle Counselor)	<i>Komon</i>
Fujiwara no Kintsugu	YES (junior third rank)	NO (Council of State advisor cum Middle Captain of the Right of the Inner Palace Guard)	<i>Komon</i>
Taira no Munenori	NO (senior fourth rank lower)	NO (Middle Right Counselor)	Purple-cloth rim
Minamoto no Michimune	NO (senior fourth rank lower on 12/30)	NO (Middle Captain of the Left of the Inner Palace Guard)	Purple-cloth rim

official posts at court and in private households. In order to advance their political and economic interests, they frequently pursued official positions within powerful households, such as those of *nyoin*, retired monarchs, or the regental family. In return, by recruiting senior nobles, a private household head like Sen'yōmon-in could receive updates on political developments and increase her chances to influence decision-making at court.

In fact, a significant number of men and women appropriate for *komon* materials attended to Sen'yōmon-in at the Rokujō residence. For example, she regularly received non-ministerial senior nobles who were hired as her directors (see Table 1). Heian and Kamakura records suggest that *nyoin* sponsored many events and encouraged senior nobles, including those without holding official positions at their administrative headquarters, to attend them. Furthermore, Sen'yōmon-in's female attendants used *komon* materials if they occupied the third court rank, which was as prestigious as a non-ministerial senior noble status. As seen by cases of other premier royal ladies such as Bifukumon-in and Takamatsu-in, some female attendants serving at a *nyoin* household held the

third rank (Kodaigaku kyōkai and Kodaigaku kenkyūjo 1994, 177, 85). Despite limited evidence available in Sen'yōmon-in's case, a woman called Lady of the Third Rank managed her Shimokatsura Estate as its custodian (Nunoya 2003, 34). As mentioned before, Heian and Kamakura *nyoin* often appointed their female attendants to estate official posts such as managing proprietor or custodian. This suggests that while overseeing the Shimokatsura Estate, the 'Lady of the Third Rank' also served the *nyoin* as her female attendant.

Not all of Sen'yōmon-in's officials, however, were qualified to sit on *komon*. For example Director Minamoto no Michimune, who was overseeing her household in 1191, held only a fourth rank (see Table 1). Likewise, royal intimates and many of her female attendants tended to hold fourth or fifth ranks and were restricted to sitting on *murasaki-beri* (purple-rimmed) flooring (Kodaigaku kyōkai and Kodaigaku kenkyūjo 1994). These *murasaki-beri* users, despite their relatively lower court ranks, maintained Sen'yōmon-in's cultural salon and administrative office. Her female attendants with the fourth rank or lower, for instance, played significant roles in widening her networks by supporting literary and cultural activities at the Rokujō Palace. Supervisors of the fourth rank shouldered responsibility in handling the daily business of the Rokujō Palace, such as creating and delivering her written orders (Hongō 1998, 7).

Despite the important roles played by various flooring items, Sen'yōmon-in had some trouble in maintaining the submission rate of some of these materials. According to the additional notes included in *The List*, her estates eventually failed to submit forty percent of the most exalted *ungen* materials. This trend perhaps explains her changing needs over the course of her life. The aforementioned adopted prince, Masanari, no longer lived with her after the war in 1221, so she did not have to prepare *ungen* seating for his royal parents who used to visit the Rokujō Palace. Her adopted daughter, Chōshi, needed *ungen* materials because she became a *nyoin* in 1229 and lived at a separate residential building within the Rokujō Palace compound. Sen'yōmon-in, however, transferred to her a land portfolio different from what was recorded on *The List*, so Chōshi could draw materials from those inherited estates.

In contrast to the *ungen* materials, Sen'yōmon-in's estates maintained good submission rates for other three seating types. For the *daimon* materials that were used by her minister-level officials, the *nyoin* continued to receive over ninety percent of the originally-planned amount. She also maintained a high submission rate of approximately eighty percent for both *komon* and purple-rimmed types, which were used for non-ministerial officials, female attendants, and *saburai*. By regularly collecting resources such as blinds, curtains, and mats to create proper working spaces, she was able to show her appreciation for services done by her supporters and to cultivate mutually supportive relationships with them.

Conclusion

Through the case studies of Kōkamon-in and Sen'yōmon-in, this article has explored connections between women's power and material goods. Under Kōkamon-in's proprietorship, Suzuyaki production started in the Wakayama Estate and continued to grow. Even though a large number of the stoneware were not sent to her residence in Kyoto, this industry generated wealth through being involved in trade across the archipelago. Such an industry benefitted both Kōkamon-in and her officials who oversaw the estate.

Sen'yōmon-in also promoted relationships with her supporters through the use of material goods. Creating appropriate spaces for her important constituents and guests at the Rokujō Palace was necessary to show proper respect and create opportunities to strengthen political influence at court. To widen her political networks, she adopted the children of powerful households and supported them with resources collected from her estates. Curtains and mats might appear as mundane objects, but they were important socio-political status markers through which the *nyoin* maintained relationships among people who regularly supported the Rokujō livelihood.

Yet, master historical narratives today still tend to be male-centered, and the ongoing justification is often a lack of sources. As shown by this study, however, the archaeological records of Suzuyaki and *The List of the Rokujō Palace Estates*—which previous historians have dismissed, or not fully explored—are quite useful in examining women's power. A key to further excavate the lives of women in the past (and also that of other under-represented groups) is to reevaluate the potential of 'mundane' primary sources by approaching them from fresh perspectives and extracting hidden evidence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Banse Akemi (1993) disproved the notion that royal women lacked independent rights to oversee their estates. Considering that multiple retired monarchs could simultaneously exist at the Heian and Kamakura courts, I use 'senior retired monarch' to signify the male head of the royal family who had stronger influence over the reigning monarch as his father or grandfather.
2. Taikenmon-in (1101–1145), Jōsaimon-in (1126–1189), Hachijō-in (1137–1211), and Kenshunmon-in (1142–1176) also held supreme proprietorship over many estates.
3. Part of this study was originally published in Janet R. Goodwin and Joan R. Piggott, eds., *Land, Power, and the Sacred: The Estate System in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018). Some of the information is also given in my book, *Uncertain Powers: Sen'yōmon-in and Landownership by Royal Women in Early Medieval Japan*. While the book

provides more detailed information, this article is succinct with a focus on the importance of examining material objects.

4. According to a multi-volume dictionary of Japanese history, *Kokushi daijiten*, Kōkamon-in's landholdings included approximately forty estates. Additionally, she held rights to collect human resources from Ōmi, Izumi, and Settsu provinces located around the capital.
5. Umekawa underscores the important connections between black wares and mourning or memorial rituals.
6. I make this argument based on the list of miscellaneous dues supporting Sen'yōmon-in's Rokujō Palace and her Buddhist temple called Chōkōdō. As discussed later, I call this document *The List of Rokujō Palace Estates*. The University of Tokyo Historiographical Institute owns a calligraphic reproduction of this source that was produced in 1907. Although a complete photocopy is unavailable, some parts are published in Ōyama (1987). Also see HKHSI 1975, 29–82.
7. Heian and Kamakura royals and aristocrats renewed the interior décor of their households twice a year. For example in the fourth month (spring) and tenth month (fall), Sen'yōmon-in collected various items from her estates, such as curtains, mats, and gold, to redecorate her residence appropriate to the season. See Kawai (2021).
8. Kōkamon-in sponsored repentance rites, ceremonies of reciting the names of the buddhas, ceremonies of venerating Buddha relics, and memorial services for deceased family members, to name a few.
9. Kōkamon-in's authority to hire or fire her estate officials was apparent. For example, one of her close followers, Hino Kanemitsu, almost lost his rights to manage her estates because he did not obey her order to become a household official of her adopted son, Kujō Yoshimichi.
10. This argument is further strengthened by Gregory Smit's study situating early Ryūkyū within "the East China Sea network" (15). For example see Chapter 1, "Ryukyu in the East China Sea Network," which explores political, economic, and cultural networks involving China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan during the tenth through fifteenth centuries.
11. Moriuchi who points out a resemblance between the Suzuyaki reliefs and the Hungry Ghosts Scroll does not provide further details in his study. This is an interesting argument and requires future research.
12. Assuming that this source described miscellaneous dues supporting Chōkōdō, the Buddhist temple that stood within the Rokujō Palace, previous scholarship named this document *The List of Chōkō Temple Estates* or *A List of Dues Levied on Chōkō Temple Estates* (Chōkōdō shoryō mokuroku or Chōkōdō shoryō chūmon). This name, however, is misleading because many of the listed dues supported the livelihood of the *nyōin* household.
13. When Go-Shirakawa died in the third month of 1193, her half-sister, Titled Princess Kōshi, was also living at the Rokujō Palace, but she died in the seventh month of the same year. So, even if the first 'miya' who received the designated materials was Titled Princess Kōshi, it did not last long. See *Dainihon shiryō*, vol. 4–4, 86.
14. Sen'yōmon-in held events for her adopted son and his supporters visited her residence. For example at the Rokujō Palace, Sen'yōmon-in held a ceremony to celebrate the fiftieth day after his birth. She invited Retired Monarch Go-Toba and leading courtiers such as Regent Fujiwara no Iezane. See *Inokuma kanpakuki*, Shōji 2 (1200)/11/2 and 11/3 daigaku shiryō hensanjo (TDSH 1972; Smits 2019). Also see *Dainihon shiryō*, vol. 4–6, 702.

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