Research Note

A New Analysis of Persian Visits to Japan in the 7th and 8th Centuries

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This research note describes the biographies of Dārāy and Ri Mitsuei, two Persians whose visits to Japan in the 7th and 8th Centuries are recorded in the Nihon Shoki and Shoku Nihongi. The research note outlines and critically engages with contemporary research, and seeks to suggest that much of the current knowledge regarding the biographies of the two figures is unsubstantiated. Furthermore, the research note seeks to provide new starting points for the analysis of the two figures. Whilst it argues that little can be known about the figure of Dārāy, the research note seeks to interact and add to debates regarding his name, nationality, rank, and the roles of other people who are often mentioned alongside him in scholarly works. Turning to Ri Mitsuei, the research note adds to previous research undertaken by the author revising some of the conclusions that he drew elsewhere.

Keywords: Persian-Japanese Relations, Ri Mitsuei, Shoku Nihongi, Nihon Shoki, Dārāy

The classical Japanese histories, the Nihon Shoki 日本書紀, completed in 720CE, and the Shoku Nihongi 続日本紀, completed in 797CE, refer on numerous occasions to the visits of foreigners from distant lands including Tocharoi, Kosalans, and Persians. whilst these figures and their visits have received attention in Japanese language scholarship, they are yet to be explored extensively in the English language. There is little scholarly consensus on the biographies of these figures, who receive only a cursory mention in Japan’s historical record. Furthermore, many theories lack substantive evidence or are based on outdated scholarship. Nevertheless, researching the visits of Tocharoi, Kosalans, and Persians to Japan is important not only for deepening our understanding of Japanese history, but for understanding the history of trade, immigration, and the journeys of travellers on the Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road. This research note will assess and problematize some of the hitherto popular theories regarding the visits of two Persians to 7th and 8th Century Japan and will seek to explore the veracity of these theories and their usefulness or lack thereof. The research note, moreover, offers some new interpretations and analyses of these figures, which may be used as a starting point for future research on the topic.

2 In this paper, the term "Persian" refers to peoples from the Sasanian Empire (224-651CE) and its pre-Islamic successor states. Contemporaneously, the Chinese referred to Sasanian Persia as Bōst 波斯 and its people as Bōstīvēn 波斯人, and these terms are usually translated into English as “Persia” and “Persian.” Edwin G. Pulleyblank notes that from the early 8th Century until 755CE the term referred to a Chinese puppet state in the region of the eastern borders of Afghanistan (Bactria). See: Edwin G. Pulleyblank, “Chinese-Iranian Relations i. In Pre-Islamic Times,” Encyclopedia Iranica, 2011.
The Figure of Dārāy

According to Itō Gikyō, the first reference to a Persian in the Nihon Shoki appears in the reign of Empress Saimei (J. Saimei Tennō 斉明天皇, 594-661CE) in 660CE. In classical English translations of the piece such as William Aston’s famous Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697, the term Kenzushashi Dachia, Kenzu Fasi Datia, or Kenzushashi Tatsua 乾豆波斯達阿 (C. Ğān dōu bōsī dá ā) is often presented as a person’s name as is illustrated in the following passage:

Again, the man of Tukhāra, Kendzushashi Tatsua, desired to return to his native country, and asked for an escort officer, saying:— “I intend later to pay my respects to the Court of the Great Country, and therefore, in token of this, I leave my wife behind.” Accordingly, he took the way of the Western Sea with several tens of men.  

The passage notes that the figure is from Tokharistan (Bactria) through its use of the contemporaneous Chinese term, Dāhuluóguó 貨 貨 人 (J. Tokara no hito, E. Tocharoi), however, the ensuing passage often taken to be the figure’s name contains an additional two place names. Firstly, the term Kenzuzu 乾豆, a possible Sinicized version of the Persian word Hindūg or Hindūgān (India) or a reference to the place name Kunduz, and secondly the Sino-Japanese term Hashi 波 斯 (C. Bōsī) which refers to Persia. Itō argues that these place names should be understood as prenominal descriptions of a person called Dachia 達 阿 (C. Dā ā) likely a Japanese version of the name Dārāy. Itō, therefore, posits two possible ways to translate the text dependent on whether the term Kenzuzu 乾豆 refers to India or Kunduz; either ‘Man from Toxārōstān: Persian Dārāy who had remained in or come from India’ or ‘Man from Toxārōstān: Persian Dārāy oí from Kunduz.’ Okamoto Kenichi who accepts the same premises as Itō argues that the term Kenzuzu 乾豆 is a reference to Samarkand, and therefore that Dārāy is a Tocharoi Persian from Samarkand. A similar position is also taken by Imoto Eiichi who argues that Kenzuzu likely refers to a city within Persia. Itō’s, Okamoto’s, and Imoto’s arguments are convincing as it is highly unusual to find a surname built from two primarily geographic terms. Nevertheless, as noted by Nishimoto Masahiro the use of the term Bōsī 波 斯 as a name is not uncommon in contemporaneous Chinese

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3 Itō, Perushia bunka torai kō, 14-17.  
4 William Aston, trans., Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697, Two Volumes in One (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1972), 265. In the original text:

又覇貨羅人。乾豆波斯達阿。欲歸本土。求請送使曰。願後朝於大國。所以留妾為表。乃與數十人。入 于西海之路。(Nihon Shoki, Page 1574, Paragraph 5).

5 The term Dāhuluóguó 貨 貨 人 is used to refer to the region in Xuánzàng’s 玄奘 (602-644), Great Tang Records on the Western Regions (C. Dà tāng xīyú jì 大 唐 西域 記) completed in 646CE (Xuánzàng, Dà tāng xīyú jì, Volume 1, Paragraphs 54 and 85).
6 Itō, Perushia bunka torai kō, 14-15.  
7 Ibid., 14-15; Itō Gikyō, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” Orient 15 (1979), 58. Some scholars have noted the possibility that the name may be derived from the Sanskrit Datta, but have generally rejected this possibility; see: Itō, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 55-63; Imoto Eiichi, Kodai no Nihon to Iran (Tokyo: Gakuseisha, 1980), 21. While the name Dārāy has, therefore, received widest acceptance, it appears to me that the Middle Persian name Dādī from the Old Persian Dātā is also a potentially valid origin for the name, although it would have likely been Sinicized in a different way.  
9 Ibid., 60.  
11 Specifically, Imoto suggests the city of Kando or Yarukata, but I have not been able to trace either of these place names. He also notes that Samarkand and other locations are potential alternatives. Imoto, Kodai no Nihon to Iran, 23-24.
his arrival can only be conjectured from the

although the one provided by Okamoto provide mere geographic specificity (Dāray’s country, region, and city of origin), and because that specificity makes logical geographic sense (he is from Tokharistan – Kunduz in Persia), the second translation or Okamoto’s alternative is, in my opinion, likely accurate. Indeed, although it is not possible to specify which city or geographic locality that the term Kenzu refers to, there is some scholarly consensus regarding Itô’s assertion that the passage demarks that the man in question as a Tocharoi man named Dāray who came from Persia.

Given the foregoing conclusions we might be able to theorize that other figures described as “Tocharoi” who came to Japan were similarly considered to have hailed from Persia, however, due to a lack of textual evidence such figures cannot be identified. There is debate in regards to the location of Tokara no kuni 吐火羅國 or 見起國 in the Nihon Shoki with scholars suggesting that the term may refer to Xiyu 西域, the Tokara islands (J. Tokara rettō 吐喀列島), the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, or Persia. Nishimoto argues that Tokara no kuni cannot be identified with Persia (a popular position accepted by Okamoto and Takató Gorô), since contemporaneous Chinese sources refer to both regions as separate entities. Drawing on the usage of the term in Chinese sources, he argues that the region is best identified as Tokharistan, situated in modern day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Indeed, given the terms’ usages in contemporaneous Chinese sources it is not possible to affirm that Tokara no kuni is anywhere other than Tokharistan without abandoning textual evidence in favour of potentially spurious philological arguments. Whilst I agree with Nishimoto, that the term Tokara no kuni (referring to Tokharistan) should be understood in contradistinction to Persia given its usage in Chinese sources; Sasanian control, patronage, and influence in the region during and before the 7th Century cannot be dismissed, and it would therefore not be unusual to find Persians in Tokharistan, Tocharoi in Persia or Tocharoi Persians, like Dāray.

Since Dāray’s leaving Japan was important enough to warrant inclusion in the Nihon Shoki, it is likely that his arrival was also recorded. Nevertheless, his name is not recorded elsewhere, and therefore the date of his arrival can only be conjectured from the Nihon Shoki’s references to the arrival of Tocharoi prior to Dāray’s outbound journey in 660CE. There are two possible dates for Dāray’s arrival, either the fourth month of 654CE during the reign of Emperor Kōtoku (J. Kōtoku Tennō 孝德天皇, 596-654CE), when two men and two women

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\item Kunduz is a part of the area of Greater Khorasan which was under the control of the Sasanian Empire until the Arab conquest of 647CE, see Hamid Wahed Alikuzai, A Concise History of Afghanistan in 25 Volumes, Vol. 14 (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2013), 110.
\item Okamoto, “Nihon ni Kita Seiikijn,” 62-63; Imoto, Kodai no Nihon to Iran, 21-24.
\item Nishimoto, “Asuka ni Kita Seiiki no Toharajin,” 4-7.
\item Nishimoto, “Asuka ni Kita Seiiki no Toharajin,” 6-7, 11.
\item Ibid., 7-10.
\end{enumerate}
from Tokharistan (J. *Tokara no kuni* 吐火羅國) were driven ashore by a storm, or the seventh month of 657CE (during Empress Saimi’s reign), when a further two men and four women from Tokharistan (J. *Tokara no kuni* 観貨蓮園) drifted ashore. Itô favours the date of 654CE due to his theories regarding Dāray’s role and identity (discussed below), however, I believe that the compilers choice of the characters *Tokara* 観貨蓮 to describe Dāray, the same characters used to describe the Tocharoi who arrived in 657CE, rather than the characters *Tokara* 吐火羅, used to describe those who arrived in 654CE, indicate that Dāray was amongst those who arrived in 657CE. It would, therefore, appear that Dāray spent around three years in Japan from 657CE to 660CE. On the other hand, if one accepts Itô’s dating Dāray spent six years in Japan.

It is difficult to establish a great deal about Dāray’s life, role, and position. His inclusion in the *Nihon Shoki*, his noted desire to pay respects at the court, the fact that several tens of men left with him, and the fact that he is named in the text, indicate that he was of high social status. The text furthermore notes that he had a wife or wives. Itô argues that Dāray was of royal blood, which due to the figure’s evident high rank is a possibility, however, Itô’s argument is unconvincing on several levels. Itô suggests that the name Dāray, which he believes was derived from the name of legendary king, Dārayaw, betrays the figure’s royal blood. Amongst the first group of Tocharoi to arrive in Japan was a person described as *Shē wei nü* 舍衛女 (J. *Shaei no onna*). Traditionally this has been translated as a ‘woman from Sravasti.’ Itô, however, argues that due to the absence of the suffix *guo* 国 (J. *koku*, E. country) or *chéng* 城 (J. *jō*, E. castle), which are usually used when referring to Shravasti as a place, and because it would be odd to find Indians and Tocharoi travelling to Japan together, that this term should be understood as a title rather than a place name. He then seeks to illustrate that the term is a Japanese transliteration of the Middle Persian, *sāh duxtag*, meaning “king’s daughter.” Following this he argues that Dāray was *Shē wei nü*’s father, due to his theory that Dāray was of royal blood, and his identification of *Shē wei nü* as the “king’s daughter.” Itô argues that sometime after Dāray became her husband, since *Shē wei nü*’s marriage to a Tocharoi is noted in the *Nihon Shoki,* such marriages (between father and daughter) were not contemporaneously uncommon. He then identifies a further figure, *Duò luò nü* 堕羅女 (J. *Dara no onna*), whose name Itô translates as *Dāray-duxtag* or “Dāray’s daughter,” as the couple’s daughter. Affirming Dāray’s royal lineage, Itô transforms Dāray into an important figure who assisted Peroz III during his military campaigns.

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20 The original text states:

夏四月。吐火羅國男二人女二人。舍衛女一人。被風流來于日向。(*Nihon Shoki*, Page 1538, Paragraph 1).

21 The original text states:

三年秋七月丁亥朔己丑。観貨蓮園男二人女四人。漂泊于筑紫。言。臣等初漂泊于海見嶼。乃以驅召。（*Nihon Shoki*, Page 1547, Paragraph 5).

22 Itô, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 60.
23 Ibid.
24 *Nihon Shoki*, Page 1538, Paragraph 1.
27 Ibid., 57.
28 Ibid., 57, 60.
29 The original text states:

丁亥。吐火羅人。共妻舍衛婦人來。（*Nihon Shoki*, Page 1562, Paragraph 4).

30 Itô, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 60.
31 Ibid., 60-61.
32 Ibid., 59.
I am not convinced by these arguments. Itô does not reference necessary textual or extra-textual evidence to support his claims and there is no reason to assume that Shē wèi nǚ is a title. To the contrary within the context of the sentence, which lists people arriving in Japan according to their place of origin and their gender, it is more reasonable to assume that Shē wèi 舍衛 refers to a place, such as Shravasti, as has been theorized by other scholars.31 Indeed, the fact that the term Shē wèi nǚ is followed by the counter Yīrén — 人 (J. Hitori) meaning “one person” indicates that Shē wèi is more likely a place of origin than a name. If Shē wèi nǚ were a name, the text would likely follow standardized patterns by which a figure’s nationality precedes their name, whereas their names are not provided.32 The concept that it is odd for a place name to lack qualifying suffixes such as the term “country” is also problematic. Not only does it nullify Itô’s argument that Dārāy is from Kunduz or India and Persia (terms which lack the relevant suffixes in the passage), but other geographic areas such as the country of Baekje (J. Kudara or Hyakusai 百濟) are frequently referred to without such qualifiers throughout the Nihon Shoki. Neither is it a rarity to find people from multiple countries on the same voyage; a passage explored later in this research note records a Persian arriving alongside Chinese and Japanese.35 Imoto argues that Shē wèi may be the name of a city in the Tokharistan region, suggesting that it may refer to Kashgar or Saveh.36 However, accepting this notion would beg the question as to why four of the party are referred to as Tocharoi, whereas a further figure is identified as coming from a specific city within the same region. Given the context of the sentence and the usage of the term Shē wèi to refer to Shravasti in other texts, it doesn’t appear that there are issues with affirming that the term Shē wèi nǚ means “a woman from Shravasti.” One potential problem arises when it is noted that Xuánzàng 玄奘 in his Dà táng xīyù jì 大唐西域記 (646CE) records that the city had been deserted, although there were still some people.37 Therefore, there is a potentiality, as Imoto suggests, that Shē wèi may refer to a separate location. Nevertheless, Itô’s use of Shē wèi nǚ as evidence for Dārāy’s royal lineage cannot be maintained. Whilst the historical record notes that this woman married one of the Tocharoi, it is unclear whether this was Dārāy since the text does not provide her husband’s name. By the same logic that I used to suggest that Dārāy came to Japan in 657CE, it would appear that the woman from Shravasti was married to someone from the first group of Tocharoi visitors since her husband is described using the characters Tokara 吐火羅 rather than Dārāy’s Tokara 觀貨運. Nevertheless, Imoto and Nishimoto both concur with Itô in suggesting that the woman from Shravasti and Dārāy were a married couple,38 although neither provide further evidence to make this case. As for Dārāy’s potential daughter, Duò luó nǚ, other scholars have argued that the term Duò luó 女羅 is an alternative transliteration of the term Tokara39 as is noted in the Nihon Shoki’s annotations.40 Since the Dà táng xīyù jì refers to a country by the name of Duò luó bō dī guó 塗羅鉾底國 (J. Darahatsutei no kuni, E. Dvaravati),41 which shares the characters Duò luó 女羅, it might be possible to argue that the term refers to this country instead. However, to accept such an argument

33 Notably by: Imoto Eiichi, “Perushiajin no raichō to urabonkai,” Daihōron 大法論 45, No. 9 (1978), 48. Itô argues that Shē wèi cannot be a place name, since the place names from whence other members of the group hailed are not mentioned, however, this is simply not factual since other members are referred to as hailing from Tokharistan. Itô, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 57.

34 Nihon Shoki, Page 1538, Paragraph 1.


36 Imoto, Kodai no Nihon to Iran, 24.

37 Xuánzàng, Dà táng xīyù jì, Volume 6, Paragraph 6.

38 Imoto, Kodai no Nihon to Iran, 24; Nishimoto, “Asuka ni Kita Seiki no Toharajin,” 3.

39 Nishimoto, “Asuka ni Kita Seiki no Toharajin,” 3.

40 Nihon Shoki, Page 1548, Paragraph 1.

41 Xuánzàng, Dà táng xīyù jì, Volume 10, Paragraph 30.
we would need to prove that the *Nihon Shoki*’s definition of the term is incorrect, that the *Nihon Shoki*’s compilers had poor geographical knowledge, or that the term *Tokara* refers to Dvaravati. Again, the context of the sentence, which lists people according to their place of origin and gender or title, suggests that rather than a name the term *Duò luó nü* refers to a “woman from Tokharistan.” Moreover, there is nothing in the sentence which suggests that this figure is the daughter of the woman from Shravasti or Dārāy. In summation, there are numerous issues with accepting Itō’s argument regarding the personage of Dārāy. Many of his theories rely on textual and extra-textual assumptions which lack sufficient evidence to establish a burden of proof.

In lieu of the accuracy of Itō’s argument, there is little we can say about Dārāy beyond that which is recorded in the text. He was a Tocharoi from Kunduz in Persia or a Tocharoi Persian from Samarkand, he was married, and was of sufficient social status to be recorded in Japan’s imperial histories and to have a retinue of men who left the country with him. We may affirm, as Nishimoto does, that Dārāy was somewhat of a leader amongst the Tocharoi in Japan due to the presence of this retinue. He left Japan for his home country travelling via Tang dynasty (618-907CE) China in 660CE leaving his wife (or wives) there, after having likely arrived in 657CE. As for religious affiliation, which Itō argues was indisputably Zoroastrian, nothing can be conclusively established. Whilst Imoto thinks that there is a potentiality that Dārāy was a Zoroastrian, he also suggests that Dārāy may have been a Buddhist. He notes that if the term *Kenzu* refers to India it may indicate a Buddhist religious identity, which causes him to translate the term Kenzushashi Dachia as “Dārāy, a Buddhist from Persia.” In itself this argument is unconvincing due to the issues associated with linking Kenzu to India, however, Imoto also notes that the *Nihon Shoki* records the Tocharoi participating in the festival of *Urabon* shortly after the arrival of the second group (of which I have argued Dārāy was a member) in 657CE. Moreover, Dārāy’s petition to leave Japan in 660CE was presented the day following *Urabon* on the 16th of the 7th month. Whilst this is far from conclusive as a plethora of religions flourished in contemporaneous Persia and Tokharistan, as noted by Imoto it may be the case that Dārāy’s connection to *Urabon* is far from accidental.

We do not hear of Dārāy again in the *Nihon Shoki*; there is no record of what happened to him after he left Japan in 660CE or if he ever returned. Itō creates an imaginative scenario linking Dārāy to the escape and subsequent campaigns of Peroz III following his father, Yazdgerd III’s death in 651CE. He writes:

For the then about 15-year-old prince Peroz, to cope with the difficulty was too hard and exacting without

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42 The original text states:

四年春正月丙午朔。大學寮諸學生。陰陽寮。外樂寮。及舍衛女。薬羅女。百濟王善光。新羅仕丁等。捧秦及珍異等物進。（Nihon Shoki, Page 1713, Paragraph 3).

43 Nishimoto, “Asuka ni Kita Seiiki no Toharajin,” 3.

44 Ibid.


46 Imoto, *Kodai no Nihon to Iran*, 35.


48 The original text states:

辛丑。作須彌山像。於飛鳥寺西。且設盂蘭盆會。暮餐観摩ト遺人。[或本云。薬羅人。] (Nihon Shoki, Page 1548, Paragraph 1).


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.
assistance from someone else with whom I should like to identify 達阿 (Dārāy). The campaign must have set in while Yazdgerd’s stay still in Khorāsān, but having heard the death of the king of kings, Dārāy escaped from the army-and-troop with his lord, Pērōz, and other followers among whom was found most probably his own daughter (舍衛女) to seek refuge in Zhāng-ān.\textsuperscript{52}

This story, used by Itō to support his theory that Dārāy was a royal, cannot be substantiated and seems unlikely given the problems of dating that would arise if it were accepted. Pērōz III did not arrive in Chāng’ān 長安 until the early 670s.\textsuperscript{53} Although Dārāy had returned to the mainland meaning that it was possible that he travelled to Chāng’ān, Shē wei nǚ remained in Japan into the 670s with a reference to her personage appearing in the first month of 676CE.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite our limited knowledge of Dārāy, he is an important figure for understanding early Japanese, foreign relations. Although the testimony of Nihon Shoki indicates that a whole community of Tocharoī were present in Japan, it is only Dārāy, a probably high-ranking Tocharoī from Kunduz in Persia, who is demarked by name. Ultimately, little can be known of the potential influence that Dārāy, as an individual, had on contemporaneous Japan, although we may concur with scholars such as Itō and Imoto, that the Tocharoī may have influenced some Japanese religious and secular practices.\textsuperscript{55} The interesting historical episode of which Dārāy was a part elucidates some of the ways in which early Japanese foreign relations were conducted and the sort of interactions which occurred between foreigners and Japanese at court. Nevertheless, following the collapse of the Sasanian Empire in the 650s, Tocharoī-Japanese relations appear to have come to an end with no Tocharoī receiving mention following the final appearance of Duò luó nǚ in 676CE. It is likely that the Tocharoī community eventually became amalgamated with the Japanese through intermarriage. While scholarship on the figure of Dārāy has often proven problematic, I believe that the conclusions made here may provide new starting points from which the figure and related topics can be researched.

The Figure of Ri Mitsuei

A second Persian is recorded as coming to Japan in the Shoku Nihongi. The text notes that in the eighth month of 736CE, Nakatomi no Nashiro 中臣名代 (?-745CE), the returning vice-envoy to the Táng, led a group of three Chinese and one Persian to have an audience with Emperor Shōmu (J. Shōmu Tennō 聖武天皇, 701-756CE).\textsuperscript{56} In the 11\textsuperscript{th} month, Nakatomi no Nashiro and others were given promotions in rank in an audience with the Emperor.\textsuperscript{57} During the same meeting, the Chinese, Kōko Tōchō 皇甫東朝 (C. Huángfǔ Dōngcháo), and

\textsuperscript{52} Itō, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 59.


\textsuperscript{54} The original text states:

\textsuperscript{55} Imoto, Kodai no Nihon to Iran; Itō, Perushia bunka torai kō.

\textsuperscript{56} The original text states:

\textsuperscript{57} Kuroita and Kokushi Daikai Henshūkai, eds., Shoku Nihongi: Zenpen, 141.
Persian, Rimitsuei 李密 鸠 (C. Li Mi), were presented with ranks according to their social status. Scholars have argued that the Persian identified as Rimitsuei and the Persian referred to as having had an audience with the Emperor several months earlier were the same person. This seems evident given the presence of Nakatomi no Nashiro in both passages and the context of the passages. As such, it is also evident that Rimitsuei had accompanied Nakatomi no Nashiro (alongside the three Chinese) to Japan during the latter’s return from his post as vice-envoy.

Various theories have emerged regarding Rimitsuei’s personage, and popular amongst these are the concept that he was either a doctor or a Syriac Christian missionary, or both. I have been critical of these positions elsewhere. The theory that Rimitsuei was a Syriac Christian missionary first appeared in the work of Peter Yoshirō Saeki. In his Keikyō hibun kenkyū 景教碑文研究, he argues that because the term Bōsī 波斯 acted as a prefix which linked terms such as si 寺 (temple) or jiào 教 (teaching) to Syriac Christianity in contemporaneous Chinese, that the term Bōsīren 波斯人 (E. Persian person) should be understood to identify Rimitsuei as an adherent of Syriac Christianity. Such usage of the word Bōsīren is not present in other contemporaneous texts where it exclusively means “Persian person” rather than “Syriac Christian.” Moreover, it would be unusual given the context of the sentence, which describes visitors to the court with reference to both their nationality and their name, to find one of these figures demarked by their religious identity rather than their nationality. In his The Nestorian Monument in China, Saeki provides different evidence to identify Rimitsuei as a Syriac Christian. He suggests that the common Chinese name, Li Mi 李密, used to refer to Rimitsuei in the Shoku Nihongi derived from a scribal error. Rather, Saeki believes that the name should have been rendered as Mīl 密, which would correspond to the Persian name Milis or Miles. If Rimitsuei was in fact a Persian named Milis, Saeki suggests that he may have been the priest Milis, father of Yazdibōzēd/Yazbōzēdē, the man who erected the Nestorian Stele (C. Dàqín jīngjiào liuxing Zhōngguó bēi 大秦景教流行中國碑). This is problematic since no link can be established between Milis and Rimitsuei other than a potential similarity of names and the fact that they had

58 The original text states:

十一月戊寅。天皇臨朝。詔授入唐使從五位上中臣朝臣名代從四位下。故判官正六位上田口朝臣義年卒。朝臣馬主兼贈從五位下。准判官從七位下大伴宿祢首名。唐人皇甫東朝。波斯人李密爵寺授位有差。 (Kuroita Katsumi and Kokushi Daikei Henshūkai, eds., Shoku Nihongi: Zenpen, 114).


65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.
both been present in the Táng capital of Cháng’ān. Moreover, as noted by Max Deeg, it would be unusual to render Millis (Milēs) as 密李 in Middle Chinese. If Rimitsuei was a Syriac Christian monk or priest, we would also expect to find a title such as sō 僧 (C. Sēng) demarking him as such, as is the case when Syriac Christian monks and priests are referred to in contemporaneous Chinese documents.

Elsewhere, I have argued that since Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Christianity were all present in contemporaneous Persia, Rimitsuei’s religious identity will remain a mystery. Whilst I maintain that Rimitsuei’s religious identity cannot be established with certainty, Ishihara Tsutomu provides important evidence for estimating Rimitsuei’s potential religious affiliation. He argues that Manichaeism had been outlawed in Táng China since 732CE meaning that it would have been nearly impossible for Nakatomi no Nashiro to receive permission from the Chinese authorities to bring a Manichaean to Japan. This appears to be a misunderstanding on the part of Ishihara, since other sources note that the laws to which he refers permitted the practice of foreign religions, but banned the preaching of those religions to the Chinese. Ishihara also notes that no references to Rimitsuei appear in contemporaneous Buddhist texts unlike contemporaneous evidence to identify his religious affiliation. In summation, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that Rimitsuei was a Syriac Christian missionary and insufficient evidence to identify his religious affiliation.

Saeki also recorded the possibility that Rimitsuei was a doctor, due to an alternative version of the final character of his name. The alternative version of Rimitsuei’s name, Rimitsui 李密醫 (C. Lí Miìi), contains the
character, i 员, which refers to medical practitioners. The other spelling for Rimitsuei’s name used thus far in this research note in which the final character ei 员 is present lacks any such connotation. This version of the name appears to be more popular in modern reprints of the text, and according to Saeki Ariyoshi and Itō was original to the text. In my own exploration of older copies of the Shoku Nihongi, I have found that the name Rimitsui and the use of characters which suggest a role in medicine to be more prevalent. P. Y. Saeki argues that given the presence of this alternative final character that Rimitsuei’s name should be translated as Milis, the doctor. On the other hand, Matsuki Akitomo, who accepts the thesis that Rimitsuei was a doctor, but rejects the concept that his name is incorrectly rendered, argues that the man should be thought of as Rimitsu, the doctor. Indeed, the fact that Emperor Shōmu was engaged in reforming Japanese medical practices perhaps lends to the case that Rimitsuei was a medical practitioner. Scholars such as Arthur Lloyd, Junjirō Takakusu, and Joseph Needham have all argued that he was a physician active within these reforms. Identifying Rimitsuei as a doctor is, however, problematic. Itō notes that if the character i 员 indicates that Rimitsuei was a doctor, grammatically it should precede his name so as to read i Rimitsu (C. Yì Li Mu). Additionally, Rinoie Masafumi illustrates that there are no references to a doctor named Rimitsu in contemporaneous documents from Chäng’an. Due to the paucity of textual evidence from Chäng’an and on a grammatical basis, it is therefore problematic to assert that Rimitsuei was a doctor. The suggestion that Rimitsuei was a doctor is often used to strengthen the argument that he was a missionary due to a perceived link between medicine and Syriac Christianity, however, although Syriac Christians did practice medicine it would be misleading to suggest that they monopolized the trade.

Elsewhere I wrote that:

...we should also conclude that Li-mi-i [Rimitsuei] visited in a secular rather than religious capacity as a physician. Such a conclusion...[suggests] that Li-mi-i had a purpose in one of Emperor Shōmu’s projects, most likely his medical reforms.

79 Ibid.
80 Morris, “The Legacy of Peter Yoshirō Saeki: Evidence of Christianity in Japan before the arrival of Europeans,” 8-10.
81 Ibid., 9.
88 Itō, Perushia bunka torai kō, 28.
89 Rinoie Masafumi, Tenpyō no kyaku, Perushajin no naji: Ri Mitsu to Keikyōhi (Tōkyō: Tōhō Shoten, 1986), 65-74.
Following further consideration, I do not believe that it is possible to affirm that Rimitsuei was a physician since this is grammatically and terminologically problematic, and lacks support in Chinese sources, although it remains a possibility. Nevertheless, I abide by my conclusion that he came to Japan for primarily secular purposes. Kōho Tōchō, the man with whom Rimitsuei received rank from the Emperor, is featured extensively in the *Shoku Nihongi*. Kōho was involved in the office of court music and later became a Vice-Governor. Yano Kenichi argues that he was brought to Japan to perform at the opening ceremony of the Nara Daibutsu 奈良大佛, and in order that his expertise might be used in the country. Since Kōho’s name is listed prior to Rimitsuei’s, Rinoie argues that it is possible to conjecture that Rimitsuei was the younger of the pair (below the age of 18 or 19) or of lower rank. In any case, while the following is potentially the product of crude reasoning, I would suggest that the *Shoku Nihongi* illustrates that the foreigners who returned to Japan with Nakatomi no Nashiro’s were categorized by their roles as either secular or religious. As noted, after the whole of Nakatomi no Nashiro’s group had an audience with the Emperor, Dōsen and Baramon, who had explicitly religious roles, met with the Emperor alone. Following this Kōho, whose role was primarily secular in nature, and Rimitsuei, met with the Emperor without Dōsen and Baramon. This suggests that the foreigners were categorized by their roles, with those involved in religious professions meeting the Emperor at one point, and those involved in secular positions at another. This conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that there are very few instances of religious figures receiving rank from the Emperor in the *Shoku Nihongi*, and under Emperor Shōmu no monks or priests received imperially awarded rank. Since Rimitsuei met the Emperor separately from Dōsen and Baramon, and since he received a rank from the Emperor, it would appear that he came to Japan in a secular capacity. Some scholars have suggested that Rimitsuei may have been involved in the field of music due to his featuring alongside Kōho in the text, however, as with his potential role as a doctor this remains unclear in the source material. Indeed, Rinoie argues that Rimitsuei could not have been a musician since he does not appear alongside Kōho and his family at later points in the text. Despite all this, since Dōsen, Baramon, and Kōho all had a role (religious, scholarly, musical or political) to play in Tenpyō 天平 (729-749CE) and post-Tenpyō era Japan, it is highly likely that Rimitsuei was also brought to Japan due to some service that he was able to render to Shōmu’s government.

Whilst Yano notes that the year of Rimitsuei’s birth, and details regarding his life once in Japan are completely untraceable, I believe that it may be possible to make some estimations regarding Rimitsuei’s personage. From the text, we know that he is a Persian who received rank from the Emperor according to his social status, and (as discussed above) it seems likely that he came to Japan in a secular role. Furthermore, his receiving of a low rank and his mention in the *Shoku Nihongi* suggest that he held a fairly high social status. Like other scholars, I believe that Rimitsuei’s name may point to details about his personage. Tō suggests

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93 Yano, “Kentōshi to rainichi ‘Tojin’ Kōho Tōchō o chūshin toshite,” 129-141.
95 Yano, “Kentōshi to rainichi ‘Tojin’ Kōho Tōchō o chūshin toshite,” 129-141.
96 Rinoie, *Tenpyō no kyaku, Perushiajin no naji: Ri Mitsei to Keikyōhi*, 105.
98 Ibid.
100 Ishihara, “Nara jidai ni rainichi shita Perushajin Rimitsuei (Ri Mitsu) kō,” 34-25; Mori, “Ri Mitsuei,” 1802.
101 Rinoie, *Tenpyō no kyaku, Perushiajin no naji: Ri Mitsei to Keikyōhi*, 103.
102 Ishihara, “Nara jidai ni rainichi shita Perushajin Rimitsuei (Ri Mitsu) kō,” 34-35.
105 See discussion in Rinoie, *Tenpyō no kyaku, Perushiajin no naji: Ri Mitsei to Keikyōhi*, 104-106.
that the name Rimitsuei may be derived from the Persian name Rāmyār.\(^\text{106}\) This seems unlikely since Li 李 (J. Ri) was a Chinese surname popular amongst Persians contemporaneously.\(^\text{107}\) Although Ishihara agrees that Li is Rimitsuei’s surname, he notes the difficulties associated with translating the character’s first name into contemporaneous Chinese, and therefore argues that the name Mitsuei 密藏 was likely constructed in order to encapsulate some sort of meaning rather than according to phonetics.\(^\text{108}\) As such, he favors the rendering Mitsui 密藏, allowing him to suggest that Ri Mitsuei was a doctor.\(^\text{109}\) Nevertheless, as discussed above there are issues with accepting not only the spelling “Mitsui,” but also the concept that it betrays some sort of meaning related to medicine. On the other hand, Imoto notes that the name is likely derived from Persian.\(^\text{110}\) He argues that since the character Mitsu 密 was used to transliterate foreign phonics such as mir, mur, or mihr into Chinese, the name Mitsuei was likely originally a Persian name such as Mihr-ay, Mihr-ey or Mihr-ag.\(^\text{111}\) Building on the work of Philippe Gignoux, Deeg has also suggested the Middle Persian name Rēv-Mihr as a potential point of origin.\(^\text{112}\) Rinoie, who explores Mitsuei’s name at length proposes mi-wei or miewat.\(^\text{113}\) Following Imoto and Deeg, I would also suggest that Mihr-dād, Mihr-ād, or perhaps even a derivative of the Sogdian Miši are potential origins for the name Mitsuei. Nevertheless, on the whole I believe that Imoto’s suggestions of Mihr-ay and Mihr-ey resemble the Japanese, Mitsuei, more closely than Mihr-ag, Mihr-dād or Mihr-ād. The concept that Rimitsuei had a Sogdian name is unlikely, although artefacts containing both Sogdian and Middle Persian inscriptions have been discovered in the Tenpyō era capital, Nara.\(^\text{114}\) These names are all theophoric in nature, consisting of the theonym Mihr (E. Mithra)\(^\text{115}\) and some additional phonics(s). Israel Campos argues that theophoric names have a religious meaning which represent either:

an act of religious devotion by the individual’s progenitors or...a personal option of the person, who chooses this name in a certain moment of his adult life.\(^\text{116}\)

Since names containing the theonym, Mihr, were popular amongst Zoroastrians and Manichaeans,\(^\text{117}\) it is reasonable to assume that Ri Mitsuei’s parents were Zoroastrian or Manichaean. Unless, Ri Mitsuei converted to another religion he too was likely Zoroastrian or Manichaean. Itō, who believes that other Tocharai and Persian visitors to Japan were Zoroastrian, suggests that because Ri Mitsuei is not mentioned further in the Shoku Nihonki, he must have been a Manichaean who fell victim to the slander of his Zoroastrian countrymen.\(^\text{118}\) Although this is a possibility, there appears no way at present to determine which of the two religions he

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\(^{106}\) Itō, Perushia bunka torai kō, 28.


\(^{108}\) Ishihara, “Nara jidai ni rainichi shita Perushajin Rimitsuei (Ri Mitsu) kō,” 31.

\(^{109}\) Ibid.


\(^{111}\) Imoto Eiichi, “Mihrak (弥勒) and other Iranian words,” Orient 18 (1982), 131.


\(^{113}\) Rinoie, Tenpyō no kyōku, Perushajin no nai: Ri Mitsei to Keikyōhi, 75-97.

\(^{114}\) Morris, “The Case for Christianity in Japan prior to the 16th Century,” 125-126.


\(^{116}\) Campos Israel, “Theophoric names as a matter of faith,” 2009.


\(^{118}\) Itō, “Zoroastrians’ Arrival in Japan (Pahlavica I),” 63 n. 25.
belonged to.

Since Ri Mitsuei’s surname, Lǐ 李, was popular amongst Persians in Táng China it is difficult to ascertain a great deal from his surname. There were some 4,000 foreign families residing in Cháng’ān by 787CE.¹¹⁸ Ye Yiliang notes that most Persians in Táng China were merchants although some were employed as administrators or in the military.¹²⁰ Statistically the likeliness that Ri Mitsuei was a merchant is therefore high, and this may explain why there are no further references to him in Japanese sources. Nevertheless, the Shoku Nihongi rarely mentions merchants (J. Shōnin 職人), and rarely refers to them by name. Due to his status, which I believe is illustrated by the fact that he is named in the document, he may have been related to other high ranking, Persian, Lǐ mentioned in contemporaneous Chinese texts. Nevertheless, there is no possible way to link Ri Mitsuei to these other figures. Prominent Lǐ include descendants of the Sasanian line, such as Lǐ Sù 李素 who was a Christian cleric and a court astronomer,¹²¹ as well as poets and medical experts such as Lǐ Xūn 李詢.¹²² The recent discovery of a mokkan 木簡 (E. a document recorded on a piece of wood) from 765CE,¹²³ may also shine some light on Ri Mitsuei. The mokkan notes the employment of a Persian called Hashi no Kiyomichi 破斯清通 at the Imperial university known as the Daigaku ryo 大學寮.¹²⁴ Whilst few have conducted research into the figure, Watanabe Akihiro of the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (J. Nara Bunkazai Kenkyusho 奈良文化財研究所) has suggested that Hashi no Kiyomichi may have been Ri Mitsuei, a member of his family, or someone else with links to the figure.¹²⁵ If true, this suggests that Ri Mitsuei or his family integrated into Japan, and that they were involved in the field of education.

Like his predecessor Dārāy, Ri Mitsuei is a mysterious figure about which little is known, but much is conjectured. Classical scholarship which has viewed Ri Mitsuei as a Syriac Christian missionary or doctor cannot be maintained. Since he visited the Emperor and received rank it is unlikely that he came to Japan in a religious role, rather it seems most likely that he was engaged in a secular field perhaps linked to education, or as Rinoie suggests that he possibly died shortly after having come to Japan.¹²⁶ Moreover, because his name is recorded in the Shoku Nihongi and because he received rank, he likely held high social status. Such is the lack of knowledge that surrounds the figure that even his original name is debated. This research note argued that his surname was likely the common Sino-Persian, Lǐ, whereas his first name was likely derived from a Mithraic

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¹²⁰ Ibid.


¹²⁴ The following is a rendering of the text. Backslashes mark the separation of sentences, whilst the character  does not mark illegible characters. It states:

大学寮解 申宿直官人事／員外大屬破斯清通／天平神護元年□□□□. (Sankei West, ”Heijōkyū ni Perushajin no yakunin ga hataraitera!! 765 nen mokkan ga shōmei ”kokusaiteki chishiki de tōyō ka” to senmonka,” 2016).

¹²⁵ Sankei West, ”Heijōkyū ni Perushajin no yakunin ga hataraitera!! 765 nen mokkan ga shōmei ”kokusaiteki chishiki de tōyō ka” to senmonka,” 2016.

¹²⁶ Rinoie, Tenpyō no kyaku, Perushajin no nai: Ri Mitsei to Keikyūsho, 107.
theonym, *Mihr*, with the addition of a further phonic. If this is the case, it is highly likely that Ri Mitsuei was a Zoroastrian or Manichaean. Ri Mitsuei’s visit to Japan, like Dārāy’s before him, helps to further demythologize the commonly held conception that Japan’s early foreign relations were limited to relations with Táng China and the Three Kingdoms of Korea (Baekje, Silla, and Goguryeo). Although, the episode illustrates that relations with non-East Asian nations were often facilitated by Sino-Japanese interaction, it also suggests that the nationals of other foreign nations influenced and interacted with early Japan.

**Conclusions**

In this research note, I have sought to offer some thoughts on early Persian visitors to Japan, and some of the potential issues with hereto accepted scholarly opinion on the topic. Previous scholarly attempts to deal with the biographies of the figures explored in this research note have often been based on outdated scholarship or have lacked sufficient evidence to ratify. This research note has attempted to provide a new starting point from which to study these figures based on new analyses and past interpretations that seem to hold some credence. While we can ascertain that Persians visited Ancient Japan and can garner limited information on these people from contemporaneous sources, there is very little that we can concretely say about these figures beyond that which is recorded in the source texts. It appears that early Persian visitors to Japan mentioned in the *Nihon Shoki* and *Shoku Nihongi* were of a high social status. Dārāy sought permission to leave Japan with a retinue of men, leaving behind his wife and promising to return in the future. Ri Mitsuei arrived as part of a returning Japanese embassy to Táng China and received rank from the Emperor. However, neither figure receives mention in Japan’s classical histories after their initial appearance. Our limited knowledge of these figures does not mean that their visits were insignificant. On the contrary, the episodes elucidate the ways in which foreigners met with Japan’s Emperors and the ways in which Japan’s foreign relations with non-East Asian nations occurred. Moreover, the episodes illustrate that Japan’s early foreign relations were not limited to relations with the Táng and the Three Kingdoms of Korea as is commonly assumed. As a closing thought it must also be noted that the figures explored in this research note were not necessarily the earliest Persians to arrive in Japan. Some scholars such as Matsuki Akimoto have contended that Persians arrived even earlier, although this doesn’t seem to have gained widespread acceptance.

**References**


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127 Matsuki, ”Kinmeichō ni Rainichī shita Kudara no ishi Ōyuryōda ni tsuite,” 447-453.


