Writing Japanese

When the Japanese first learned to read and write, they did so in Chinese, the only writing system available to them. Chinese is a tonal, monosyllabic language. Japanese is polysyllabic with a dissimilar grammatical structure. Fortunately for the Japanese, the Chinese had already created a system for reproducing the sound of foreign words, primarily Buddhist terms, by using characters for their phonetic value alone. The author of Kojiki adopted this method for the names of places, gods, and people. The editor of the Man'yōshū also used characters for their phonetic value-twenty-nine of them for the sound shi alone. Thanks to the regularity of the poetic meter, it is usually clear when the editor expected characters to be sounded using their Japanese pronunciation—uma (horse) instead of ma for 馬, for example.

The introduction of calligraphy spurred the development of the Japanese syllabary. The so-called grass style brought from China by Kūkai became a favorite of poets. By the second half of the ninth century, it led writers to streamline commonly used characters, and by the eleventh century, these streamlined characters were being used for their sound alone, although each syllable could be written in a number of ways. Called kana (borrowed names), the syllables continue to be used for grammatical markers and to soften the appearance of a text by writing out what might also be expressed in visually dense Chinese characters.

Two forms of the syllabary appeared. Katakana, angular kana, developed from pieces of characters. It was used to transcribe prayers and indicate the Japanese reading of Chinese texts. Hiragana has a smooth, round look. Known also as the woman's hand, it was

and enhance the pathos of having lost a child while away. Other men wrote anonymously in Japanese, compiling a history, Ōkagami (Great Mirror), to supplement and correct Akazome's portrait of Michinaga; the first military tales; a poetic tale titled Tale of Ise; and miscellanies of anecdotes and observations. Along with women, they also produced folding screens, wall panels, and handscrolls in what is known as Yamato-e, Japanese art. (See Color Plate 14.)