

## Chapter 1

### THE EARLIEST RECORDS OF JAPAN

The oldest extant annals in Japanese are the *Records of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*, 712 C.E.) and the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki* or *Nihongi*, 720). The *Records* opens with chapters on the mythological Age of the Gods and continues the story of Japan to about 500 C.E..<sup>1</sup> Although this book reveals early Japanese ways of thinking and patterns of behavior, it contains little that can be taken as historical fact. The *Chronicles*, a much longer work, covers the same story from the Age of the Gods to 500 but continues for some two hundred years more until the end of the seventh century (697). The *Chronicles* becomes increasingly reliable as history after about the late sixth century. Indeed, the bestowal of the posthumous name of Suiko, meaning "conjecture the past," on an empress who reigned from 592 to 628 seems to suggest that it was around this time that the Japanese, no doubt under Chinese influence, first began the serious writing of history, albeit often in the interests of the ruling house that the historians served.

An important source of written information about Japan before the sixth century is the Chinese dynastic histories. By the time Japan first came into the Chinese purview, about the first century B.C.E., the writing of history had left far behind the foundation myths of the *Classic of Documents*, and Chinese

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1. The *Records of Ancient Matters* also provides genealogical data for the sovereigns of the sixth and early seventh centuries.

historians were compiling generally reliable records of the past. In the first century B.C.E., Japan was called Wa by the Chinese<sup>2</sup> and was described as a land comprising more than a hundred tribal communities. As late as the Chinese Three Kingdoms period (220–265), according to the dynastic accounts, Wa was still divided into some thirty communities (although we know from the archaeological record in Japan that the country was then evolving into its first centralized state).

The Chinese histories do not tell us how the people now known as the Japanese first found their way to the islands. Without conclusive evidence on this subject, modern scholars have expounded various theories based on linguistics, archaeology, architecture, and a great many criteria, with some contending that the Japanese originally came from Southeast Asia and others insisting that they were a northern people. The Japanese probably had diverse origins, with various peoples entering from different directions. The mainstream of cultural influence came from the continent by way of Korea. When the first Qin emperor (247–210 B.C.E.) unified China and built the Great Wall to prevent the northern barbarians from making incursions on the fertile plains of the Yellow River, it seems likely that his actions helped direct the migrations of different peoples eastward or westward along the wall. Disturbances resulting from the movement of tribes were sometimes so severe that Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.E.) of the Han dynasty was compelled to send expeditionary forces to restore order. An outpost of the Han empire thus was established in northern Korea and served as a model of organized government to the surrounding tribes, possibly including the Japanese.

It may seem surprising that Japanese were in Korea in the first century C.E., but there appears to have been no fixed boundary at the time between the territory of the Koreans and that of the Japanese. Very likely there was a fairly steady eastward migration from north of China to the Korean peninsula and thence to the Japanese archipelago. During the third century, the Chinese withdrew from Korea, and the country was divided into three states, Koguryō, Paekche, and Silla, and beginning in the fourth century, Japanese periodically fought in Korea, usually siding with Paekche against Koguryō and Silla. Japanese historians claim that Japan established a territorial enclave at the tip of the Korean peninsula called Mimana sometime during the fourth century, although nationalistic Korean historians vigorously deny that such an enclave ever existed. Whatever interests the Japanese may have had in Korea were finally destroyed in 562. During the seventh century, Silla, with Chinese aid, subjugated the rival kingdoms of Koguryō and Paekche and unified the peninsula. These successes of the combined forces of Silla and Tang China drove the Japanese from the continent into the relative isolation of their islands, an event

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2. Wa is the Japanese pronunciation. In Chinese, it is Wo.

that may have helped bring about the birth of the historical Japanese state. That is, the rise of powerful dynasties in China and Korea impelled Japan to achieve a unified government in order not to be overwhelmed.

To understand some of the important influences on Japanese thought since earliest times, we turn next to the islands' geographical features. The Chinese account of Japan in the *History of the Latter Han Dynasty* opens with the words "The people of Wa live on mountainous islands in the ocean," and in fact, the two elements of water and mountains, together with a kind of sun worship, have always been very close to the Japanese. Although we are likely to find in any country's religious beliefs a worship of noticeable or beneficial aspects of nature, the combination of these three elements is especially characteristic of Japan. The numerous clear streams and the ever-present ocean have always delighted the Japanese, as we can tell from their earliest poetry. To their love of water the Japanese joined a passion for lustration and cleanliness and, in our own day, for swimming. The Japanese love of mountains is not surprising in a country renowned for its numerous peaks, especially the incomparable Mount Fuji, and the worship of the sun is not unnatural in a country blessed with a temperate climate. Today we can still appreciate what an awe-inspiring experience it must have been for the Japanese of any age to stand on the summit of Mount Fuji and greet the sun as it rose from the waters of the Pacific. Other characteristics of the Japanese recorded in the early Chinese accounts that are still noticeable today include honesty, politeness, gentleness in peace and bravery in war, a love of liquor, and religious rites of purification and divination.

The Japanese accounts of the birth of the gods and of the foundation of their country belong, of course, to the realm of mythology rather than history, but they afford us a glimpse of Japanese attitudes toward the world and nature. Also, since later Japanese attached importance to these legends, some knowledge of them is indispensable to understanding Japanese thought.

## JAPAN IN THE CHINESE DYNASTIC HISTORIES

The following extracts are from the official histories of successive Chinese dynasties, beginning with the Latter Han (25-220 C.E.), although the first of these accounts was written for the Kingdom of Wei (220-265) and compiled about 297 C.E.. The *History of the Latter Han* was compiled about 445 and incorporates much from the earlier description of the Japanese.

These accounts are contained in a section devoted to the barbarian neighbors of China at the end of each history. Thus they do not occupy a prominent place in these works, being more in the nature of an afterthought or footnote. Particularly in the earlier accounts, the information is apt to be scattered and disconnected and, not surprisingly, is presented by official chroniclers who viewed Japanese affairs with an eye to Chinese interests and prestige.

Nevertheless, we can discern some of the main outlines of Japan's development in these early centuries. In the first accounts, Japan appears to be a heterogeneous group of communities in contact with China, with one ruling house bidding for Chinese recognition of its supremacy over the others. In one case, the influence of the Chinese ambassador is said to have been the decisive factor in settling a dispute over the succession to the Yamato throne. The kings of Wa, as the Yamato rulers were known, also made strong claims to military supremacy in Korea, which were at times acknowledged by the Chinese court. In the later accounts, the unification of Japan has progressed noticeably. The sovereignty of the Yamato house has been asserted over hitherto autonomous regions, and its government displays many of the trappings of the Chinese imperial structure. On occasion, the Japanese court is rebuked for its pretensions to equality with the Chinese and even for its hinted superiority, as when the Japanese ruler addressed the Chinese, "The Child<sup>3</sup> of Heaven in the land where the sun rises addresses a letter to the Child of Heaven in the land where the sun sets."

## ACCOUNTS OF THE EASTERN BARBARIANS

### HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF WEI (*WEI ZHI*) CA. 297 C.E.

The people of Wa [Japan] dwell in the middle of the ocean on the mountainous islands southeast of [the prefecture of] Daifang. They formerly comprised more than one hundred communities. During the Han dynasty, [Wa] envoys appeared at the court; today, thirty of their communities maintain intercourse with us through envoys and scribes. . . .

The land of Wa is warm and mild. In winter as in summer the people live on raw vegetables and go about barefooted. They have [or live in] houses; father and mother, elder and younger, sleep separately. They smear their bodies with pink and scarlet, just as the Chinese use powder. They serve food on bamboo and wooden trays, helping themselves with their fingers. When a person dies, they prepare a single coffin, without an outer one. They cover the graves with earth to make a mound. When death occurs, mourning is observed for more than ten days, during which period they do not eat meat. The head mourners wail and lament, while friends sing, dance and drink liquor. When the funeral is over, all members of the family go into the water to cleanse themselves in a bath of purification.

When they go on voyages across the sea to visit China, they always select a man who does not comb his hair, does not rid himself of fleas, lets his clothing get as dirty as it will, does not eat meat, and does not lie with women. This

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3. The term *tenshi*, usually rendered as "Son of Heaven," is actually gender neutral; here, in the Japanese case, it refers to Empress Suiko.

man behaves like a mourner and is known as the "mourning keeper." When the voyage meets with good fortune, they all lavish on him slaves and other valuables. In case there is disease or mishap, they kill him, saying that he was not scrupulous in observing the taboos. . . .

Whenever they undertake an enterprise or a journey and discussion arises, they bake bones and divine in order to tell whether fortune will be good or bad. First they announce the object of divination, using the same manner of speech as in tortoise shell divination; then they examine the cracks made by fire and tell what is to come to pass.

In their meetings and in their deportment, there is no distinction between father and son or between men and women. They are fond of liquor. In their worship, men of importance simply clap their hands instead of kneeling or bowing. The people live long, some to one hundred and others to eighty or ninety years. Ordinarily, men of importance have four or five wives; the lesser ones, two or three. Women are not loose in morals or jealous. There is no theft, and litigation is infrequent. In case of violations of the law, the light offender loses his wife and children by confiscation; as for the grave offender, the members of his household and also his kinsmen are exterminated. There are class distinctions among the people, and some men are vassals of others. Taxes are collected. There are granaries as well as markets in each province, where necessities are exchanged under the supervision of the Wa officials. . . .

When the lowly meet men of importance on the road, they stop and withdraw to the roadside. In conveying messages to them or addressing them, they either squat or kneel, with both hands on the ground. This is the way they show respect. When responding, they say "ah," which corresponds to the affirmative "yes."

The country formerly had a man as ruler. For some seventy or eighty years after that there were disturbances and warfare. Thereupon the people agreed upon a woman for their ruler. Her name was Pimiko. She occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people. Though mature in age, she remained unmarried. She had a younger brother who assisted her in ruling the country. After she became the ruler, there were few who saw her. She had one thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink and acted as a medium of communication. She resided in a palace surrounded by towers and stockades, with armed guards in a state of constant vigilance. . . .

In the sixth month of the second year of Jingchu [238 C.E.], the Queen of Wa sent the grandee Nashonmi and others to visit the prefecture [of Daifang], where they requested permission to proceed to the Emperor's court with tribute. The Governor, Liu Xia, dispatched an officer to accompany the party to the capital. In answer to the Queen of Wa, an edict of the Emperor, issued in the twelfth month of the same year, said as follows:

Herein we address Pimiko, Queen of Wa, whom we now officially call a friend of Wei. The Governor of Daifang, Liu Xia, has sent a messenger to accompany your vassal, Nashonmi, and his lieutenant, Tsushi Gori. They have arrived here with your tribute, consisting of four male slaves and six female slaves, together with two pieces of cloth with designs, each twenty feet in length. You live very far away across the sea; yet you have sent an embassy with tribute. Your loyalty and filial piety we appreciate exceedingly. We confer upon you, therefore, the title "Queen of Wa Friendly to Wei," together with the decoration of the gold seal with purple ribbon. The latter, properly encased, is to be sent to you through the Governor. We expect you, O Queen, to rule your people in peace and to endeavor to be devoted and obedient. . . .

When Pimiko passed away, a great mound was raised, more than a hundred paces in diameter. Over a hundred male and female attendants followed her to the grave. Then a king was placed on the throne, but the people would not obey him. Assassination and murder followed; more than one thousand were thus slain.

A relative of Pimiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was [then] made queen and order was restored. Zheng [the Chinese ambassador] issued a proclamation to the effect that Iyo was the ruler. Then Iyo sent a delegation of twenty under the grandee Yazaku, General of the Imperial Guard, to accompany Zheng home [to China]. The delegation visited the capital and presented thirty male and female slaves. It also offered to the court five thousand white gems and two pieces of carved jade, as well as twenty pieces of brocade with variegated designs.

[Adapted from Tsunoda and Goodrich, *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories*, pp. 8-16]

#### HISTORY OF THE LATTER HAN DYNASTY (*HOU HAN SHU*)

CA. 445 C.E.

The Wa dwell on mountainous islands southeast of Han [Korea] in the middle of the ocean, forming more than one hundred communities. From the time of the overthrow of Chaoxian [northern Korea] by Emperor Wu [r. 140-87 B.C.E.], nearly thirty of these communities have held intercourse with the Han (Chinese) court by envoys or scribes. Each community has its king, whose office is hereditary. The King of Great Wa resides in the country of Yamadai. . . .

In the second year of the Jianwu Zhongyuan era [57 C.E.], the Wa country Nu sent an envoy with tribute who called himself *Dafu*. This country is located in the southern extremity of the Wa country. Emperor Guangwu bestowed on him a seal. . . .

During the reigns of Huandi [147-168] and Lingdi [168-189] the country of

Wa was in a state of great confusion, war and conflict raging on all sides. For a number of years, there was no ruler. Then a woman named Pimiko appeared. Remaining unmarried, she occupied herself with magic and sorcery and bewitched the populace. Thereupon they placed her on the throne. She kept one thousand female attendants, but few people saw her. There was only one man who was in charge of her wardrobe and meals and acted as the medium of communication. She resided in a palace surrounded by towers and stockade, with the protection of armed guards. The laws and customs were strict and stern.

[Tsunoda and Goodrich, *Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories*, pp. 1-3]

#### HISTORY OF THE LIU SONG DYNASTY (SONGSHU) CA. 513 C.E.

The following extract is preceded by an account of four successive Japanese rulers who asked to be confirmed in their titles by the Chinese court. One of these titles was "Generalissimo Who Maintains Peace in the East Commanding with Battle-Ax All Military Affairs in the Six Countries of Wa, Paekche, Silla, Imna, Jinhan and Mokhan." Wa refers to Japan, and the other five names to states comprising most of the Korean peninsula. On at least two occasions in the fifth century, the Chinese court, while accepting the fealty of the Japanese "king," confirmed his claim to military supremacy in Korea.

Kō died and his brother, Bu,<sup>4</sup> came to the throne. Bu, signing himself King of Wa, Generalissimo Who Maintains Peace in the East Commanding with Battle-Ax All Military Affairs in the Seven Countries of Wa, Paekche, Silla, Imna, Kala, Jinhan and Mokhan, in the second year of Shengming, Shunti's reign [478], sent an envoy bearing a memorial which reads as follows: "Our land is remote and distant; its domains lie far out in the ocean. From of old our forebears have clad themselves in armor and helmet and gone across the hills and waters, sparing no time for rest. In the east, they conquered fifty-five countries of hairy men; and in the west, they brought to their knees sixty-six countries of various barbarians. Crossing the sea to the north, they subjugated ninety-five countries. The way of government is to keep harmony and peace; thus order is established in the land. Generation after generation, without fail, our forebears have paid homage to the court. Our subject, ignorant though he is, is succeeding to the throne of his predecessors and is fervently devoted to your Sovereign Majesty. Everything he commands is at your imperial disposal. In order to go by the way of Paekche, far distant though it is, we prepared ships and boats. Koguryō,<sup>5</sup> however, in defiance of law, schemed to capture them. Borders were

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4. Yūryaku, 456-479.

5. A state in northern Korea.