

INTRODUCTION

Japanese historical accounts written during the last twelve hundred years have been consistently narrowed and influenced by three preoccupations: first, by an age old absorption in an “unbroken” line of sovereigns descended from the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu), leading historians to concern themselves largely with imperial history and to overlook changes in other areas; second, by a continuing concern with Japan’s cultural uniqueness, causing many intellectuals, especially those from the eighteenth century to the close of World War II, to be intensely interested in purely Japanese ways and to miss the significance of Chinese and Korean influences; and third, by the modern tendency of scholars to specialize in studies of economic productivity, political control, and social integration and thus to avoid holistic investigations of interaction between secular and religious thought and action.

But in recent years historians have extended their studies to questions that lie well beyond the boundaries set by these enduring preoccupations. This Introduction will attempt to outline the nature of this shift and to point out how research in new areas – and from new points of view – has broadened and deepened our understanding of Japan’s ancient age.

NEW HORIZONS

Beyond genealogy

Belief in a single line of priestly rulers was strong as far back as the third century A.D. when the Japanese kingdom of Yamatai, according to an item found in an early Chinese dynastic history, was governed by hereditary rulers. Later in that same century a powerful kingdom based in the Yamato region of central Japan emerged under a succession of kings and queens who ruled as blood relatives of their predecessors. Gaining control over most of the Japanese islands and a portion

of the Korean peninsula, they erected huge mounds (*kofun*) in which to bury their priestly predecessors – mounds that were truly impressive monuments to inherited authority. Because the Yamato kings and queens (*ōkimi*) have long been considered direct ancestors of the later Japanese emperors and empresses (*tennō*), the government of present-day Japan still does not permit excavations at *kofun* where Yamato rulers are thought to have been buried. Largely on the basis of research carried out at hundreds of other *kofun* sites, historians are beginning to agree that the Yamato kings and queens were willing to use much of their human and material resources for mound building because they believed that this was the best way to symbolize, sanctify, and strengthen their positions on the sacred line of descent.

Incontestable proof of descent-line preoccupation is found in an inscription carved on a fifth-century sword unearthed at Inariyama in northeastern Japan. It includes the names of six clan (*uji*) chieftains who served Yamato kings, and each name is identified as the son of the chieftain ahead of him on the list. Equally strong evidence of this early absorption in genealogy is obtained from descent myths passed along by word of mouth and finally assigned core positions in chronicles (the *Kojiki*¹ and the *Nihon shoki*²) compiled at the beginning of the eighth century. The chronicles themselves were shaped and tinted by the urge to exalt an imperial line running from the Sun Goddess through the Yamato kings to the emperors and empresses reigning in the seventh century (see Chapter 10).

Nearly all the large structures (burial mounds, capitals, sanctuaries) and written materials (chronicles, poems, inscriptions) erected or composed during the last two centuries of Japan's ancient age were meant to enhance the current ruler's position on the sacred descent line. This preoccupation was expressed also in myths and rituals of local regions that had been placed under direct imperial control. Festivals (*matsuri*) honoring the ancestral deities (*kami*³) of the imperial clan were thus

1 Kuroita Katsumi, ed., *Shintei zōho: kokushi taikei* (hereafter cited as KT) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1959), vol. 1; translated by Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968).

2 Sakamoto Tarō, Ienaga Saburō, Inoue Mitsusada, and Ōno Susumu, eds., *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* (hereafter cited as NKBT) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1967), vols. 67 and 68; translated by W. G. Aston, *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (hereafter cited as Aston) (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).

3 Just what a *kami* is and how the word should be translated has been discussed and debated for years. Some scholars are inclined to think that the term was introduced from Korea. In Japan it has long denoted unseen deities that reside in awesome things (*shintai* or “*kami* bodies”) located in particular places. For a thoughtful reexamination of views regarding *kami*, see John Keane, SA, “The *Kami* Concept: A Basis for Understanding the Dialogue,” *Oriens Studies*, no. 16 (December 1980): 1–50.

customarily held not only at the capital whenever a new sovereign was enthroned but also at local shrines where rituals had been established by imperial authority. Therefore most historical writing, especially that by officials, has long been affected by a deep and lasting belief in the divinity of Japan's sacred imperial line.

This belief was strengthened during World War II by the government's endeavors to arouse feelings of loyalty to the current occupant of the throne. Under the influence of an intellectual climate charged with "emperorism," thousands of soldiers willingly marched into hopeless battles screaming *tennō heika banzai* (long live the emperor), and hundreds of pilots volunteered for suicidal attacks remembered as *kamikaze* (kami wind) raids. Japan's Department of Education published and distributed a book on the emperor-headed *kokutai* (nation body) for the guidance of teachers and students,⁴ and historians produced a flood of printed material on the origins, development, and divinity of Japan's "unbroken" imperial line.

Although considerable study is still devoted to the ancient roots of Japan's emperor institution, the grip of imperial-line preoccupation was definitely broken by defeat in World War II. The Allied Occupation forced the adoption of a constitution that separated politics from religion and made the emperor a symbolic head of state, not a divine descendant of the Sun Goddess. After the war some individuals even dared to say and write that Japan no longer needed an emperor, and many historians exercised their new freedom by questioning the origins of an imperial institution that had long been considered too sacred for objective and critical study. They probed for the significance of phrases and paragraphs copied from Korean and Chinese accounts, expressed doubts about the authenticity of reports that could not be squared with other sorts of evidence, and made distinctions between myth and historical fact. Writers who had previously accepted ancient myths of divine descent as literal truth have maintained that Japan's single line of imperial descent has at times been badly bent if not actually broken, that some traditional dates are several centuries off, and that certain occupants of the imperial throne may have been Korean descendants. Others have looked through existing sources for signs of historical change within myths (essentially ahistorical verbalizations of rites), discovering themes appropriate to different periods of Japan's ancient past (see Chapter 6).

⁴ John Owen Gauntlett, trans., *Kokutai no Hongi, Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949).

In this fresh air of religious and intellectual freedom, archaeologists have thrown much new light on the “prehistoric” age of Japan by discovering material evidence from thousands of sites throughout the Japanese islands, other than the tombs of Yamato kings.⁵ These new data, coupled with information gleaned from continental sources and historical truth extracted from recorded myths, permit historians to delineate a process by which a centralized Yamato state emerged during the third century, flourished in the fifth, and declined in the sixth. By looking objectively at this new evidence through wide-angle lenses, they can now see that the line of Yamato kings was not simply an early segment of Japan’s imperial line but a succession of priestly rulers who had gained awesome economic and military power by adopting imported techniques for building tombs and irrigation systems, making and using iron tools and weapons, and running an increasingly complex bureaucracy (see Chapter 2).

For the earlier Yayoi period – beginning with Japan’s agricultural age around 300 B.C. and continuing to the rise of the Yamato state in about A.D. 250 – archaeological reports have been almost as startling. Based on investigations at sites in various regions of the country, they show that the rapid spread of wet-rice agriculture was accompanied by larger and more stable social groups, higher degrees of social interdependence, and tighter political control. At the beginning of this process, agricultural communities appeared. Then came small kingdoms that, by the middle of the Yayoi period, were gradually incorporated into what has been called “kingdom federations.” According to the archaeological evidence, it is thought that these federations were profiting from exchanges with neighbors as far away as Korea, enabling them to acquire or make symbolic bronzes (mirrors, weapons, and bells) and such useful iron implements as spades, swords, and spears.⁶

Archaeological discoveries for pre-Yayoi times have also opened our eyes to change during the more than eight thousand years of Japan’s preagricultural pottery age. This Jōmon (“rope-patterned” pottery) period probably began around 8500 B.C. when a gradual rise of the sea level off the northeastern coast of Asia was turning Japan into an insular land and when clay pots were first made and used. But pre-

5 The results of archaeological investigations, including research on wooden tablets (*mokkan*), were outlined by Joan R. Piggott, “Keeping Up with the Past: New Discoveries Enrich Our Views of History,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 38 (Autumn 1983): 313–19.

6 For an excellent recent summary of what is now known about Yayoi life, see Tsude Hiroshi, “Nōkō shakai no keisei,” in *Genshi kodai*, vol. 1 of Asao Naohiro, Ishii Susumu, Inoue Mitsusada, Ōishi Kaichirō et al. eds., *Iwanami kōza: Nihon rekishi* (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1984), pp. 117–58.

Jōmon discoveries have also been dramatic, forcing historians to continue moving the beginning of Japan's stone age further into the past. Until a few years ago, they concluded that this stone age dated back to about 20,000 B.C. But they now say it goes back to around 100,000 B.C.,⁷ and before these pages go to press they will surely be saying – in the light of new discoveries – that people lived on the islands of Japan much earlier than that.

While archaeologists have been investigating the remains of life in a past that was until recently largely unknown and unimagined (see Chapters 1 and 5), historians have been using these and other types of evidence to study currents of change that flowed through and beyond the genealogical sphere. In doing so they provide penetrating views of change in the highly textured life that followed the introduction and spread of wet-rice agriculture and that reached high points of cultural sophistication before the Nara period came to a close. Special attention has been given to changing forms of kami worship (Chapter 6), Buddhist development (Chapter 7), economic growth (Chapter 8), cultural achievement (Chapter 9), and the emergence of a historical consciousness (Chapter 10). Studies under these and other rubrics enable generalists to draw a fuller picture of life in particular periods: the Yayoi (Chapter 1), the Yamato (Chapter 2), the reform century (Chapter 3), and the Nara (Chapter 4).

Beyond Japan

Preoccupation with cultural uniqueness first narrowed and sharpened Japanese views of their ancient past in the eighteenth century. This was when national learning (*kokugaku*) scholars, such as Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), turned against a Neo-Confucian ideology that was introduced from China and that, with revisions, was officially endorsed by the Tokugawa military regime. In searching for a Japanese substitute, national learning scholars made meticulous studies of ancient sources, looking for unmistakable evidence of what was said and done before the country was inundated by Korean and Chinese texts. But the urge to carry out such investigations became much stronger in the nineteenth century when Japan faced, and reacted to, pressure exerted by expanding Western powers. Resentment of the West – in response first to the West's use of modern guns and ships along Japan's shores and then to its religious beliefs and political

⁷ Yoshie Akio, *Rekishi no akebono kara dentō shakai no seijuku e: genshi, kodai, chūsei*, vol. 1 of *Nihon tsūshi* (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha, 1986), p. 27.

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ideas – peaked in the years around World War II. Western individualism and egalitarianism were rejected at this time, and ancient Japanese traditions were embraced. Even the use of Western words and the wearing of Western clothes were officially discouraged. And historical studies highlighted the country's kami-created imperial system (*tennō-sei*), its indomitable Japanese spirit (*Nihon seishin*), and its divine “nation body” (*kokutai*).⁸

Japanese absorption in their cultural uniqueness seems to have induced Western scholars to translate and study ancient sources that were highly valued by national learning scholars and by World War II historians writing about the glories of Japan's imperial past. In 1882 Basil Hall Chamberlain translated the *Kojiki*, the ancient chronicle to which Motoori had turned in his search for uniqueness;⁹ in 1896 W. G. Aston produced an English version of the *Nihon shoki*, the next-oldest chronicle and the first of Japan's Six National Histories;¹⁰ in 1932 Sir George B. Sansom combed through early chronicles for his study of ancient law and government;¹¹ in 1934 J. B. Snellen translated portions of the *Shoku Nihongi*, the second of the Six National Histories and the one covering the Nara period;¹² in 1935 M. W. DeVisser used ancient sources to write a two-volume study of government-supported Buddhism;¹³ between 1970 and 1972 Felicia G. Bock translated the first ten books of the *Engi shiki*, legal procedures compiled in response to an imperial order issued in 905;¹⁴ In 1973 Cornelius J. Kiley analyzed ancient sources for his research on imperial lineage in ancient times;¹⁵ and between 1974 and 1978 Richard J. Miller compiled data recorded in ancient chronicles for his investigations of clans and imperial bureaucracy during the Nara period.¹⁶

8 See Delmer M. Brown, *Nationalism in Japan: An Introductory Historical Analysis* (New York: Russel and Russel, 1971).

9 This translation appeared first in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (hereafter cited as TASJ) 10 1st series (supplement) (1882): 1–139. For a more recent translation, see n. 1.

10 See n. 2.

11 George B. Sansom, “Early Japanese Law and Administration”, TASJ 9, 2nd series (1932): 67–109, and TASJ 11 (1934): 117–49.

12 J. B. Snellen, “Shoku Nihongi (Chronicles of Japan)”, TASJ 11, 2nd series (1934): 151–239 and TASJ 14 (1937): 209–78.

13 M. W. DeVisser, *Ancient Buddhism in Japan: Sutras and Ceremonies in Use in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries A.D. and Their History in Later Times*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1935).

14 Felicia G. Bock, trans., *Engi-shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era [Books 1–5]* and *Engi-shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era [Books 6–10]* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970 and 1972).

15 Cornelius J. Kiley, “State and Dynasty in Archaic Yamato,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 33 (November 1973): 25–49.

16 Richard J. Miller, *Ancient Japanese Nobility: The Kabane Ranking System* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); and Richard J. Miller, *Japan's First Bureaucracy: A Study of Eighth-Century Government*, Cornell University East Asia Papers, no. 19. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, China–Japan Program, 1978).

The recent popularity of TV programs on life in ancient Japan is due in part to a lingering effect of wartime efforts to deepen belief in the country's unique and sacred institutions. But because today's ancient history "boom" has not been fueled by an emotional rejection of foreign ways, scholars are much more open to the significance of imported techniques and ideas. Their studies help us see how life was fundamentally altered in those early days by the importation of advanced methods for growing rice, making iron implements, erecting large burial mounds, installing complex irrigation systems, and building grand sanctuaries and capitals. New insights into the nature and extent of continental influence have been obtained from mainly three types of investigation. The first is research in Chinese and Korean sources. (Inoue Hideo, for example, translated an ancient Korean history, and Inoue Mitsusada, in Chapter 3, examines early Japanese history in the context of the contemporary Northeast Asian situation.) The second kind of investigation is the archaeological excavations at thousands of sites throughout the Japanese islands. (As noted by J. E. Kidder in Chapter 1, the Takatsuka and Fujinoki sites have attracted special attention because the excavated grave goods and wall paintings were obviously made by Korean immigrants.) The third type is the comparative archaeological investigations. (In Chapter 5 Okazaki Takashi uses the results of such studies to discuss the origin and timing of important technological and cultural imports.)

A new awareness of the effects of early continental influence is reflected also in comparative studies outside the fields of history and archaeology, especially in mythology, folklore, linguistics, cultural and social studies, and anthropology. Without detailing the contributions made by these diverse disciplines, we note only that (1) Chapter 6 by Matsumae Takeshi is based on important investigations in mythology and folklore; (2) Yoshie Akio and other sociologists have produced valuable studies of social life in ancient times;¹⁷ and (3) Carmen Blacker has compared different forms of shamanism in Asia, carried out extensive field work, and written a masterful study of Japanese shamanism.¹⁸

As more scholars come to recognize the importance of Korean and Chinese influence on Japanese cultural development, a few Japanese scholars are beginning to look differently at their country's cultural uniqueness. Instead of accepting the national learning assumption that

¹⁷ See Yoshie, *Rekishi no akebono*.

¹⁸ Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975).

the essence of what is unique can be found only in beliefs and ideas untarnished by foreign influence, a few have concluded that the very core of Japanese culture has been continually altered and reinforced by religious beliefs, ethical principles, and political concepts introduced from Korea and China.¹⁹

Beyond the secular

Today, scholars of Japanese ancient history tend to be interested mainly in the hard facts of political control, economic productivity, and social integration, not in the power of beliefs and ideas. Preoccupation with what can be measured, dated, and documented (in contrast with wholeness, quality, and value) has certainly been strengthened by Western historical thought, especially by the economic materialism of Karl Marx. But Japanese secular interests have been sharpened also by the country's spectacular economic growth in recent years and by a widespread distaste for inquiries even remotely connected with war-time propaganda focused on the marvels of the Japanese spirit.

To be sure, our understanding of Japan's ancient past has been deepened and broadened by the work of secular-minded historians. As we noted, some have looked beyond genealogical concerns to interactions among hitherto-unexamined spheres of secular life, and others have tried to assess the influence of techniques introduced from foreign lands. But only a few have ventured outside the bounds of secular change to assess the effects of the spiritual power believed to flow from and through divine beings, sacred priests, kami rites, funeral services, and sacred capitals. Even studies of religious practices in ancient times are likely to be based on visual, textual, and datable manifestations of religious life, not on connections – let us say – between religious activity and state policy. Consequently, most investigations of Japan's early religious life can be characterized as detailed descriptions of particular sects, priests, and texts – investigations that do not ask, for example, why a powerful political patron preferred one doctrine to another. But a change is now taking place as more historians begin to look beyond the power of secular energy to that of widespread belief in divine beings and forces. And some scholars are even venturing into holistic research and making interpretations based on the use of conceptual models.

¹⁹ Yuasa Yasuo took this position in *Kodaijin no seishin sekai*, vol. 1 of *Rekishi to Nihonjin* (Kyoto: Mineruba shobō, 1980).

TOWARD A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Moves toward a more holistic approach to the study of Japan's ancient past are now attracting attention. Ishida Ichirō has developed the thesis that kami belief has provided, throughout Japan's history, its most basic cultural values.²⁰ Ienaga Saburō, a distinguished intellectual historian, has disclosed a meaningful linkage, at different times and places, between political interests and preferred Buddhist doctrines.²¹

Two Americans have also made important holistic studies. Joan Piggott, in a forthcoming book on the Tōdai-ji (temple), demonstrates that Emperor Shōmu (A.D. 701–56) and his court were willing to use much of their human and material resources to construct a statewide system of temples because they hoped and believed this would bolster imperial control at a time of economic strain and political instability.²²

Allan G. Grapard, in a book on the Kasuga cult, rejects the old assumption that the best way to deepen our understanding of Japanese religious history is to dig deeply into one aspect of a faith while disregarding other religious traditions. He claims, moreover, that our picture of religion at any time and place in Japan will be flawed if we examine only the two major faiths (kami worship and Buddha worship) apart from nonreligious currents generated by expanding clans and imperial regimes. Claiming that the usual investigations of priests, sects, and texts will not explain the essence of religious change, Grapard hypothesizes that Japan's religiosity in the Nara period took its character from developments at particular places where the beliefs and practices of clans had a "combinative" relationship with imported Buddhism and with social and economic developments, as clearly reflected in discussions of legitimacy and power. Special significance is seen in the fact that the Kasuga Shrine (the place for worshipping the Fujiwara tutelary kami) and the Kōfuku Temple (the place for honoring Fujiwara ancestors) were built in Nara just when the Fujiwara clan was rising to a position of power and influence at the imperial court.²³

A small but growing number of intellectual historians are now convinced that a truer picture of ancient life can be drawn by using

20 Ishida Ichirō, *Kami to Nihon bunka: Shintōron josetsu* (Tokyo: Pereikansha, 1983).

21 See Ienaga Saburō, *Jodai Bukkyō shisō shi kenkyū* (Tokyo: Hotei shobō, 1942); and Ienaga Saburō, *Nihon bunka shi*, no. 187 of the *Iwanami shinsho* series, 4th ed. (Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 1984).

22 Joan R. Piggott, "Tōdaiji and the Nara Imperium" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1987) is used and cited in Chapter 7.

23 Allan G. Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

conceptualized models, or paradigms, as analytical tools. Concluding that traditional narrow, specialized treatments will reveal no more than disconnected slices of past reality, they are constructing paradigms (relatively unchanging fields of cultural energy) to help them see cultural change as a whole. By using this approach, they will be better able to analyze complex cultural interactions throughout history and not be left to grope for the general picture after reading descriptive studies of what happened in disparate historical fields over short periods of time.

The earliest and most significant strides in this direction were taken by Muraoka Tsunetsugu (1884–1946) before World War II when historical writing was restricted and colored by Japan's preoccupation with divine imperial descent and cultural uniqueness. After devoting considerable research to the religious history of the West, Muraoka delved into Shinto thought and found three basic characteristics: (1) "imperial country-ism" (*kōkoku shugi*), (2) "reality-ism" (*genjitsu shugi*), and (3) "brightness–purity-ism" (*meijō shugi*).²⁴ In selecting "imperial country-ism" as his first characteristic, Muraoka seems – under the influence of the contemporary preoccupation with Japan's single line of sacred imperial descent – not to have appreciated the historical fact that much kami worship, especially at lower levels of premodern society, had little or no connection with the priestly role of a Japanese sovereign. Moreover, his second and third characteristics ("reality-ism" and "brightness–purity-ism") should be reconsidered and reformulated from a broader perspective than that of kami worship. Nevertheless, Muraoka's studies stimulated and informed later thought on Japanese cultural paradigms, such as the following.

Vitalism

Agreeing with Muraoka that kami belief lies at the very base of Japanese culture but looking at cultural change, as a whole, a few historians have identified a set of old and lasting beliefs tentatively labeled *vitalism*. This paradigm symbolizes a relatively stable field of cultural energy that swirls about the worship of kami for their mysterious power to create, enrich, prolong, or renew any form of life here and now.²⁵ Early signs of vitalism can be found in female clay figurines

²⁴ Muraoka Tsunetsugu, *Nihon shisōshi kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1939), pp. 419–68; Delmer M. Brown and James T. Araki, trans., *Studies in Shinto Thought* (Tokyo: Japanese Ministry of Education, publishing for UNESCO, 1964), pp. 1–50.

²⁵ This paradigm was considered in a paper delivered at the Second (1968) International Conference for Shinto Studies held in Claremont, Calif., by Delmer M. Brown, "Kami, Death, and