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BOOK THE FIRST

ARCHAIC PERIOD (BEFORE A.D. 700)

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## BOOK THE FIRST

### *ARCHAIC PERIOD* (BEFORE A.D. 700)

THERE are a few geographical and other facts which it is useful to bear in mind in tracing the history of Japanese literature. If we glance at a map of Eastern Asia we see that Japan forms a group of islands somewhat larger in superficial area than Great Britain and Ireland, separated by a narrow strait from the adjoining continent. Here lies the peninsula of Corea, inhabited by a nation distinct from the Chinese in race and language, but from ancient times dependent both politically and intellectually on its powerful neighbour. Corea has shown little originality in the development of its literature or civilisation, and its chief importance in connection with Japan depends on its geographical position, which, in the infancy of the art of navigation, made it the natural intermediary between Japan and China.

China, with its ancient civilisation, its copious and in many respects remarkable literature, and a history which goes back for more than two thousand years, has for many centuries exercised a commanding influence over all its neighbours. What Greece and Rome have been to Europe, China has been to the nations of the far East. Japan, in particular, is very deeply indebted to it. There is no department of Japanese national life and thought,

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whether material civilisation, religion, morals, political organisation, language, or literature, which does not bear traces of Chinese influence.

Beyond China lies India, which has furnished one important factor in moulding the literature of Japan, namely, Buddhism. If, in regard to Japan, China takes the place of Greece and Rome, Buddhism, with its softening and humanising influences, holds a position similar to that of Christianity in the Western World. The alternate preponderance of these two powers is an interesting feature of Japanese history, and we shall see that it has not been without effect upon the literature.

We must not, however, forget the native genius of the Japanese nation, which, in spite of numerous external obligations, has yet retained its originality. The Japanese are never contented with simple borrowing. In art, political institutions, and even religion, they are in the habit of modifying extensively everything which they adopt from others, and impressing on it the stamp of the national mind. It is the same with the literature. Though enormously indebted to China, and at times hindered in its natural development by a too implicit reliance on foreign guidance, it has remained nevertheless a true index of the national character. It is the literature of a brave, courteous, light-hearted, pleasure-loving people, sentimental rather than passionate, witty and humorous, of nimble apprehension, but not profound; ingenious and inventive, but hardly capable of high intellectual achievement; of receptive minds endowed with a voracious appetite for knowledge; with a turn for neatness and elegance of expression, but seldom or never rising to sublimity.

The insular position and political independence of

## ARCHAIC PERIOD

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Japan no doubt account partially for the literature retaining its native originality of character. But more is no doubt due to a fundamental difference of race from the nations to which the Japanese have been indebted. There is reason to believe that the Japanese nation contains an aboriginal polynesian element (which some writers call Malay), but the evidence of language and anthropology is conclusive that it is in the main a continental race, quite distinct, however, from the Chinese. It must have come from a more northerly region, and geographical considerations point distinctly to Corea as the point of embarkation. Beyond this it is safer not to go. Nor need we attempt to fix any date for their migration. Native tradition is silent on the subject, or rather assumes that the Japanese are aborigines. The process of colonisation probably extended over centuries, and the numerous immigrations from Corea to Japan in historical times are no doubt simply a continuation of the same movement.

The first historical fact to be gleaned from the legendary stories which have been preserved to us in the ancient Japanese annals is an invasion of the central part of the country, already settled by men of Japanese race, by a conquering army from the western island of Kiushiu. Their leader, Jimmu Tennō, who is recognised as the first Mikado, established his capital in the province of Yamato at a time which it is best to indicate vaguely as a few centuries before the Christian epoch. Here, or in one of the adjoining provinces, his successors reigned for many centuries, each Mikado building himself a palace and founding a capital in a fresh locality. A semi-nomad arrangement of this kind is obviously incompatible with much advance in civilisation. It was not until the capital

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was established on a more permanent footing at Nara, in the beginning of the eighth century, that any substantial progress was made in literature and the arts.

Although the Archaic period has left us but few literary monuments, it is marked by two events of prime importance for the development of literature in Japan. One is the introduction of the art of writing, with which was associated an acquaintance with the literature and history of China; and the other the first propagation of the Buddhist religion. Both came, in the first place, from Corea, which had received them from China no long time before. Until they became acquainted with Chinese the Japanese had no written character. It is probable that individuals had acquired some knowledge of the Chinese language and script early in the Christian era, but the first actual mention of the study of Chinese in Japan belongs to A.D. 405. In this year a Corean named Wangin was appointed tutor in Chinese to a Japanese Imperial Prince. He was the first of a succession of teachers from Corea whose instructions paved the way for a revolution in Japanese customs and institutions, not less profound and far-reaching than that which we have witnessed in our own day as the result of an acquaintance with Western civilisation and science.

Buddhism was introduced about one hundred and fifty years later—in the middle of the sixth century—but it was not until the seventh that it made much progress. Its real founder in Japan was the Imperial Prince Shōtoku Daishi, who died A.D. 621.

In the scanty remains of the period with which we are now dealing, there is scarce any trace either of Buddhist or of Chinese influences. It may be said that the *Kiujiki*, a historical work attributed to the Prince just mentioned,

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should be reckoned an exception to this statement. But its authenticity has been questioned ; and, in any case, it is in the Chinese language, and therefore, properly speaking, forms no part of Japanese literature.

## SONGS.

The oldest relics of the genuine native literature of Japan are a series of songs contained in the ancient annals known as the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, and the *Norito* or liturgies of the Shinto, or native Japanese religion.

These songs are associated with some historical or quasi-historical incident, and are ascribed to Mikados or other distinguished personages. Several of them are attributed to Jimmu Tennō, who is said to have founded the Japanese monarchy in 660 B.C., and equally fictitious accounts are given of others. Probably we shall not be far wrong if we assign most of the poems of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* to the latter part of the Archaic period, namely, to the sixth and seventh centuries of our era.

The poetry of this time possesses a certain philological and archæological interest, but its merit as literature is small. The language is still unformed, and there is a plentiful lack of imagination and of the other higher qualities of poetry. What, for example, can be more primitive than the following war-song, which is supposed to have been chanted by Jimmu Tennō's soldiers, and which, the author of the *Nihongi* informs us, was still sung by the Imperial Guards in his own day ?

“ *Ho ! now is the time ;  
 Ho ! now is the time ;  
 Ha ! Ha ! Psha !  
 Even now  
 My boys !  
 Even now  
 My boys !* ”

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Or this, which is dated 90 B.C. ?

*“ The Hall of Miwa  
 (Of sweet saké fame),  
 Even at morn its door  
 Let us push open—  
 The door of the Hall of Miwa.”*

Saké, it ought, perhaps, to be explained, is an intoxicating liquor brewed from rice. The sentiment of this song therefore recalls our own “We won’t go home till morning.”

The following, which is said to have been composed by the Mikado Ōjin, A.D. 282, but which more probably belongs to the sixth century, may serve to indicate the highest level to which poetry attained during this period. This Mikado was about to add to his harem a beautiful woman named Kami-naga-hime, or the “long-haired maid,” when he discovered that his son had fallen violently in love with her. He invited them both to a banquet, and then surprised his son by resigning to him the lady with the following words :—

*“ Lo! my son!  
 On the moor, garlic to gather,  
 Garlic to gather,  
 On the way as I went,  
 Pleasing of perfume  
 Was the orange in flower.  
 Its branches beneath  
 Men had all plundered,  
 Its branches above  
 Birds perching had withered,  
 Midway its branches  
 Held in their hiding  
 A blushing maiden.  
 Lo! my son, for thee  
 Let her burst into blossom.”*



## SHINTO RITUALS

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The *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* have preserved to us more than two hundred of these poems. Their study tends to correct ideas such as that of Macaulay, who, doubtless reasoning from the now exploded premiss that Homer is a primitive poet, argued that “in a rude state of society we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection.” Judging from this early poetry of Japan, a want of culture by no means acts as a stimulus to the poetic faculty. We nowhere find “the agony, the ecstasy, the plenitude of belief,” which Macaulay would have us look for in this product of an age and country which were certainly far less advanced than those of Homer in intellectual culture. Instead of passion, sublimity, and a vigorous imagination, we have little more than mild sentiment, word-plays, and pretty conceits. Moreover, a suspicion will not be banished that even for such poetical qualities as they possess, these poems are in some degree indebted to the inspiration of China. Of this, however, I cannot offer any definite proof.

## SHINTO RITUALS.

The prose of the Archaic period is represented by a series of Norito,<sup>1</sup> or prayers to the deities of the Shinto religion, which were recited with much ceremony by the Nakatomi, a hereditary corporation of court officials whose especial function it was to represent the Mikado in his capacity of high priest of the nation. Their precise date and authorship are unknown. In their essence they are no doubt of very great antiquity, but there is reason

<sup>1</sup> Vide *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, March 1879, &c., for a translation of some of these by Sir Ernest Satow.

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to believe that they did not assume their present form until the seventh century, some of them perhaps even later. The Norito are not known to have been committed to writing before the period Yengi (901–923), when the preparation was begun of the work entitled *Yengishiki* or “Institutes of Yengi,” a collection of the ceremonial regulations in force at this time. The *Yengishiki* enumerates seventy-five of these prayers, and gives the text of twenty-seven, which, no doubt, comprise all the most important. There are prayers for a good harvest, deprecating fire and pestilence, invoking blessings on the palace, services in honour of the Food Goddess, the Wind Deities, and so on. The most famous of all is the Ōharai or General Purification Service. It is not devoid of literary quality, as the following translation may perhaps indicate. The other Norito which I have read are much inferior in merit.

“Give ear, all ye Imperial Princes, Ministers of State, and high functionaries, who are here assembled, and hearken to the great purification by which at this interlune of the sixth month are purged and washed away all sins which may have been committed by Imperial officials and attendants—whether they wear the scarf [women] or the shoulder strap [stewards]; whether they bear on their back the bow, or gird on them the sword.

“Of yore, our Imperial ancestors who dwell in the plain of high heaven, summoned to an assembly the eight hundred myriads of deities, and held divine counsel with them. And they gave command, saying, ‘Let our August Grandchild hold serene rule over the land of fair rice-ears—the fertile reed-plain.’ But in the land thus delivered to him there were savage deities. These they chastised with a divine chastisement, and expelled with a