

***Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*: the first imperial histories**

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The first chronicles of Japan were created almost simultaneously and feature similar content, but they enjoyed a different status and reception throughout Japanese history. From imperial chronicles they were transformed into sources for linguistic research, religious dogma and nationalistic claims.

What was the socio-political context?

Most of the population of the Japanese archipelago in the eighth century were farmers, while others had such occupations as fishing, weaving, pottery, armoury and ritual performance. They were ruled by local lords which formed networks of alliances. Some of these rulers were still buried in the centuries-old tradition of *kofun*, megalithic funerary mounds similar to those on the Korean peninsula and the Eurasian steppe. However, an increasing number of these rulers recognised allegiance to the institution of the emperor and his capital city. Superior authority was built with reference to continental culture. Besides Buddhism and a centralized administration based on that of the Sui and Tang dynasties, the authority of the emperor was also ensured by a coherent myth linking their institution to that of local gods. *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* fulfilled this role together with a series of prayers and rituals related to agricultural cycles.

A different kind of history

Kojiki (712) and *Nihon shoki* (720) are the first historical chronicles of Japan. They contain mostly exemplary deeds of emperors, copying the format of Chinese dynastic histories. The concept of recording events was new, and so these texts blend myth in quite freely, making us wonder: is history a type of myth?

Kojiki ('Account of Things Past') was compiled by Ono Yasumaro (?-723) and presented to the emperor in 712. Yasumaro recorded what the oral chronicler Hieda no Are had learned by heart.

We are therefore at the threshold between oral and written history. It is divided in three volumes. The first deals with mythology. It tells first of the High Heavenly Plain in which the original deities reside, and the creation of the Japanese archipelago from drops from the spear of the deity Izanagi, who then courts Izanami and gives birth to various deities. Izanami, however, is killed by giving birth to the deity of fire. Izanagi follows her into the underground realm of the dead, but after glimpsing his wife's decaying state, he is chased back by ghouls. Izanagi then cleanses himself at a river-mouth, thus giving birth to many deities including Amaterasu and her brother Susano'o. The narrative then moves on to episodes related to the province of Izumo, and the events leading up to the birth of the first emperor. The second volume relates the establishment of the Yamato state by the first emperor Jimmu, the deeds of prince Yamatotakeru, and the Korean campaigns led by Empress Jingu and Emperor Ojin. And the last volume contains the story of the decline of emperor Nintoku, and of subsequent emperors up to Empress Suiko. Overall, the main concern of *Kojiki* is to establish the divine origin and the continuity of the imperial lineage.

Nihon shoki ('The Written Chronicles of Japan') was compiled by as many as three separate teams working on different volumes. The supervisor of the project was Shinno Toneri, and Ono Yasumaro also took part. The title is most likely an abbreviation of *Nihonsho no teiki*, literally 'The Imperial Chronicles of the Documents of Japan,' which refers to a specific Chinese model: the 'imperial chronicle' sections of the 'Documents of the Han' (c. 92 CE) and 'Documents of the Later Han' (c. 432 CE). Another model was 'Springs and Autumns,' a chronicle of the kingdom of Lu from around the fifth century BCE. The text is written in classical Chinese, and the compilers turned for help to collections of model sentences such as the *Yiwen leiju* (Literary Phrases, Classified). These sources indicate the primary function of the text: unlike *Kojiki*, which was intended for a domestic audience closely related to the imperial family, *Nihon shoki* was written in the international language of classical Chinese and was meant to testify to rulers of the region we now call East Asia the righteousness of the rule of the emperor of the kingdom of Wa. This is also why the title of the chronicle refers to the 'rising sun' (*Nihon*, the current modern name for Japan) as a new and elegant self-identity in comparison to the kingdom of Wa, which was a slightly demeaning name used by the Chinese kingdom. The text of *Nihon shoki* is wider chronologically – while *Kojiki* had stopped at the reign of Empress Suiko (592-628), *Nihon Shoki's* account starts from the origins of the world to empress Jito and then to the end of the year 697. Overall, *Nihon shoki* is a much more

detailed work, often including various accounts of the same event, and so it has less cohesion, being little more than an enumeration of imperial deeds. *Nihon shoki* was also the first in the tradition of the Six National Histories, compiled on imperial commission between the eighth and tenth centuries. Both chronicles contain a clear historical intention, epitomized by the words of Emperor Tenmu (622-686, reigned from 673), who observed that the chronicles of the emperors and the lineages of aristocratic families contain errors and falsehoods, which was a serious problem because these oral traditions constituted the basis of the nation. Tenmu therefore decreed the compilation of official chronicles.

One example of the differences between the two texts are in the account of the imperial descent, detailing how the first emperor started to rule. While both texts agree on Ninigi, the Heavenly Grandson, being the first emperor, *Kojiki* underlines the role of the sun-goddess Amaterasu, as the one who gives Ninigi the imperial regalia: the curved beads, the mirror, and the sword that Susano'o found in the tail of the eight-headed dragon he had slayed. In contrast, *Nihon shoki* does not even mention Amaterasu's role. This is because the two texts establish the imperial lineage in different ways: *Kojiki* starts with the description of Takama no hara ('The Plain of Heaven') and its gods who play a major role in everything that happens on earth. Amaterasu is here one of the most important deities, as shown by the episode of the Heavenly Rock-Cave: upset by the unruly behaviour of his brother Susano'o, Amaterasu hides herself into a cave, plunging the whole world into darkness, in what could be seen as a mythical version of a solar eclipse. The other deities' attempts to coax her out culminate with the erotic dance of the deity Ame-no-Uzume, which will later be invoked by playwrights as the beginnings of theatre in Japan. The dance causes an excitement among the deities that piques Amaterasu's curiosity, causing her to shine her face out and restore order both in heaven and earth. In *Nihon Shoki* however, the emphasis is on *yin* and *yang* elements and pairs of male-female deities, the most important of which are Izanagi and Izanami, who create the Japanese islands and many other deities from their union. Among them is also Amaterasu, who only plays a secondary role in the establishment of the imperial lineage.

One controversial figure is that of Susano'o no Mikoto, or the Brave-Swift-Impetuous-Male. He originally appears as a trouble-making deity associated with sea and storms, eventually causing Amaterasu's cave retreat. However, after he is banished by Amaterasu to the province of Izumo, he becomes a civilizational hero. His most celebrated deed is the slaying of the eight-headed dragon.

Finding out that this dragon was about to eat the eighth daughter of an elderly couple, Susano'o layed out eight tubs with an alcoholic drink refined eight times, thus making all the dragon's heads tipsy. He then cut them up one by one with his Totsuka no Tsurugi ('Ten Fists Long Sword'). In the tail of the dragon he found the sword Ame no Murakumo no Tsurugi ('Sword of the Gathering Clouds of Heaven'). This is interpreted by some historians as reflecting the importation of metallurgy techniques from the continent. Susano'o then gave the sword to his sister Amaterasu, as a form of appeal and recognition of her higher authority, and it was later used by the hero Yamato Takeru to escape from a burning grass field, thus earning it the name Kusanagi no Tsurugi ('Grass Cutting Sword'). By slaying the dragon, Susano'o also saved Kushinadahime, a deity of rice paddies, whom he married, thus becoming associated with agriculture and seasonal cycles. Some historians even interpret the slaying of the dragon as a metaphor for the control of the water of Hii River for the irrigation of rice fields. Susano'o then went on to found an alternative imperial lineage, which eventually submitted to the authority of the main lineage in the province of Yamato. The perplexing change in the character and attributes of Susano'o, from trouble-making exile to agricultural patriarch, has been attributed to a mix of features of two separate historical rulers. The contradictory nature of Susano'o reflects the dynamic situation of rivalling centres of power before the authority of the Yamato court was widely recognized. Historians have tried to unravel the historical truth underneath these stories, pointing out that many of the deities mentioned were the ancestors of the clans that held positions in the court at the time when the chronicles were compiled.

How were these two texts interpreted throughout history?

Nihon shoki was the main text which was later interpreted in support of the specific rituals of the emperor. This started with official lectures on the *Nihon shoki*, organized by the court six times between 812 and the late tenth century. These lectures conflated the mythology of the two texts. This tradition of interpretation continued with medieval commentaries, which attempted to match the deities (*kami*) and events described in the two chronicles with Buddhist doctrine and geomantic principles.

The Edo period (17th-19th centuries) enjoyed an unprecedented rise in publishing, which ended the monopoly of the elite on classic texts, and made them accessible, often in an abbreviated form, to all social classes. This included *Nihon shoki*, whose stories became widely known. These old texts then caught the attention of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), a leading scholar of nativist studies (*kokugaku*) who claimed that the origin of the Japanese nation lies in the original words (*furukoto*) spoken in the Japanese archipelago. The early chronicles were therefore precious documents for recovering the original language, but *Nihon shoki*, written in Chinese script, represented the external, foreign element. And so *Kojiki*, who had been a secondary text, became central to Norinaga's ideas, culminating in his thorough study *Kojikiden* of 1798.

These ideas about a common language were reinterpreted by the Meiji administration in the nineteenth century as relating to the 'national language' (*kokugo*) and the newly-formed discipline of literary history, which was made up of historical texts written in vernacular Japanese. For example, *Kojiki* also contains the first example of a poem in Japanese history, composed by Susano'o after he slayed the eight-headed dragon, and proclaiming in 31 syllables his joy at founding a family with Kushinadahime in the province of Izumo. Concomitantly, both chronicles were declared sacred for the newly revised domestic beliefs which became the state religion of Shinto. *Kojiki* was again preferred over *Nihon Shoki*. This was because its myths were useful both for supporting the institution of the Meiji emperor and for providing material for ethnographers searching for an idealized origin of the Japanese people, such as Yanagita Kunio and Orikuchi Shinobu.

In conclusion, both texts are relevant not only for their initial production, but also for their continuous influence and the various reinterpretations throughout the centuries. They show us that history and myth are interrelated, and their interpretation can vary greatly depending on who reads them again in which period.

Introduction of Buddhism to Japan

Also included in Nihon Shoki is the story of the introduction of Buddhism to Japan. According to Nihon shoki, this happened in 552. King Song of Paekche, one of the kingdoms in the Korean peninsula, was fighting the neighboring Silla kingdom and wished for an alliance with the Kingdom of Wa, as Japan was then called. The king thus sent an embassy with gifts including bronze and stone Buddhist statues as well as sutra scrolls and ornaments to Emperor Kinmei of the Kingdom of Wa. This caused immediate debate among the main ruling clans at court regarding the acceptance of this foreign belief. The Mononobe clan who oversaw the running of the imperial army, along with the Nakatomi clan who was in charge of ritual performance at court, argued against the new faith, which they considered unnecessary and potentially threatening to the already established domestic cults practiced by the various clans. However, the powerful Soga clan was in favour of Buddhism, as they recognised its sophistication and its potential of enhancing the authority of the imperial institution on an international stage. The Emperor finally decided to accept the gifts and put the Soga clan in charge of establishing this new religion. In this same Soga clan would later be born prince Shotoku Taishi, also mentioned in Nihon shoki, who among others would institute Buddhism as a state religion. The transmission of Buddhism is only one of the dimensions of the increased cultural influence from East Asia dubbed 'the Asuka enlightenment' because it coincides with the Asuka period (552-710). This included adopting writing, historiography exemplified by Kojiki and Nihon shoki, complex theories of government such as an effective bureaucracy, and technical knowledge required, for example, to cast Buddhist statues in bronze.

The transmission probably did happen sometime during the reign of Emperor Kinmei (539-571), but one should be careful in accepting the date of 552 as correct. Firstly, the chronicle claims that the king of Paekche gifted a sutra that was not translated into Chinese until 703, which means its name was added by the chronicles' editors. Secondly, the year 552 is symbolic, because, according to some calculations, it marked the beginning of a final degenerate phase in the transmission of Buddha's teachings. Another element to keep in mind is that, although at the time the Soga clan had the upper hand, after a century the Nakatomi clan would regain a strong position, and would influence the writing of these chronicles.

So the story of the transmission of Buddhism is more about an internal fight for power and internationalism versus localism than the actual content of the faith. The different editorial approaches to Kojiki and Nihon shoki, one a mythical narrative for a local audience, the other a Chinese-style imperial chronicle, exemplify these same two tendencies. They will coexist and alternate in influence throughout Japanese history, with periods of opening and assimilation of continental influences followed by periods of seclusion and domestic elaboration.