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**Farris/Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures**

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he central contention of this book is that the rich archaeological discoveries of the past few decades have enabled historians to develop much more satisfactory interpretations of ancient Japan than was possible when scholars depended mostly on written sources. This truth is evidenced in four areas of inquiry: the hoary question of Yamatai; Japan-Korea relations; the creation of Chinese-type capital cities; and the appropriation of Chinese governing arrangements. These topics illustrate the broad process of historical evolution from a simple to a complex society, a process that in Japan's case is best viewed as occurring in two stages.

### HISTORIOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

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Japan's philosophers and statesmen have long sought inspiration and legitimacy from the written record of their ancient past. The shaping of bygone eras to contemporary agendas began at least by the late seventh century, when members of the ruling elite compiled first *A Record of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*) and then *The Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon shoki*). These books describe how a dynasty unbroken for ages had come to rule over divinely chosen islands. That interpretation survived over the next millennium despite the political decline and impoverishment of the imperial family.

Historical studies reached a new level of sophistication after 1700, when scholars of National Learning (*kokugaku*) performed philological and literary exegeses of ancient texts. Several writers envisioned a pure and innocent age of unique Japanese virtues before Chinese influence poisoned people's hearts

in the era after 700.<sup>1</sup> Modern oligarchs recreated the imperial institution after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, but *A Record* and *The Chronicles* served as the classical origins for many ideas expressed in the debate over the new ideology.<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s, a fundamentalist approach to these histories bolstered belief in the divine imperial throne and, by extension, Japan's war effort.

Not everyone agreed with the version of Japan's ancient period put forward in the court-sponsored histories. As early as the eighteenth century, Neo-Confucian rationalist Arai Hakuseki composed a radical critique of Japan's first chronicles.<sup>3</sup> After 1868, scholars avidly borrowed European historiographic techniques to interpret their distant past in light of findings elsewhere. These endeavors produced modern skeptics who claimed that the revered texts were contradictory and poorly substantiated, but until 1945 these critical scholars were a minority subject to harassment and even jail terms.

In the postwar period, historians analyzed and reinterpreted the ancient period as never before. With the imperial family no longer sacrosanct, scholars had more freedom to think and write about *A Record* and *The Chronicles* and to critique them using contemporary Chinese and Korean annals. They soon realized that the eighth century, when the formerly sacred texts had been compiled, really marked the beginning of Japanese written history, as it was the first century that could grant full scope to a historian's skills. That period produced an abundance of literary sources: law codes, poetry collections, detailed court chronicles, Buddhist stories, administrative documents. The age before 700, by contrast, was uncertain territory for textual experts. By the late 1970s, historians faced a crisis because they had virtually exhausted the plausible interpretations that could be gleaned from documents extant for the era until 800.

As Japanese historians depleted the written record, however, their colleagues in archaeology were hard at work. By the mid-1960s they had initiated an "archaeology boom" that continues today. A tide of hitherto unimagined original sources flooded the field, rejuvenating debates that had become arid and meaningless. Thanks to the efforts of innumerable archaeologists, scholars have never been so close to recreating the lives of long-vanished inhabitants of the archipelago, whether Yayoi peasants, Nara princes, or merchants outside Osaka Castle.

Like history, postwar archaeology had premodern roots but was influenced to a greater degree by European techniques.<sup>4</sup> The discovery of cultural artifacts dated back to the 600s, but men of learning did not make use of them until the eighteenth century. The American biologist E. S. Morse introduced modern archaeology to Japan in 1877 when he conducted the first scientific

excavation at a prehistoric shell mound near Tokyo. Japanese academicians eagerly founded anthropological and archaeological associations and adopted the European periodization of antiquity: Old and New Stone Ages, Bronze Age, and Iron Age.

Between 1900 and 1945, archaeologists published research that laid the foundation for the postwar explosion of activity. Early in the century, Japanese scientists brought back basic new techniques from Europe, including typology and stratigraphy. By the 1920s, scholars had begun to employ local pottery styles to elaborate a chronology for ancient Japan unlike any proposed for the Mediterranean or Europe. About the same time, a leading thinker realized that it would be “difficult to utilize the periodization of *The Chronicles* as it is written.”<sup>5</sup>

Two major discoveries stimulated archaeological interest after World War II. The first was the initial excavation of a Japanese Palaeolithic site at Iwajuku, several hours from Tokyo by train. The finds at Iwajuku suggested that human habitation of the archipelago was much older than previously believed. The second site was Toro, a third-century village that archaeologists unearthed complete with rice paddies and wooden tools.<sup>6</sup> Excavations proliferated thereafter, and by the late 1950s archaeologists had their hands full reporting on new sites and preserving old ones.

Beginning in 1962, the archaeology boom was in full swing. And with the information explosion, further specialization took place. Today Japan has an active archaeological community with more than four thousand members, about twenty times as many as in Great Britain, for example. In 1983 these scholars published over 1,600 site reports and received permits to dig at an estimated 14,500 excavations, seven times as many as in 1973.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, permits numbered a staggering 26,140, while expenditures amounted to 83.8 billion yen, almost \$600 million.<sup>8</sup>

Archaeologists are largely responsible for a remarkable surge of interest in the ancient period, but they have had assistance from many quarters. In 1950, the Japanese Diet passed the Cultural Properties Preservation Law (no. 214 *bunka zai hogo hō*) requiring that an archaeological team be allowed to excavate prior to any major construction. The postwar building boom, which has laid bare so many acres for department stores and highways, has meant that the law has been frequently invoked. The press has played an important (although not always helpful) role, too, because it has fed the desire of Japanese citizens to know more about their ancient heritage.

Some say that the end of the prewar ideology should be cited as another reason for the archaeology explosion in postwar Japan. As noted earlier, the

newfound freedom to treat historical sources critically has opened the way for many innovative interpretations that helped to destroy the myth of a single dynasty ruling a unified country from time immemorial. Yet ideology still places limits on archaeological research. The Imperial Household Agency bars excavation of more than one hundred tombs believed to predate the eighth century because they may contain the remains of once-sacred emperors (*tennō*) or their kin, a ban enforced since the late 1800s.

Today scholars of ancient Japan are obliged to know both written and material records. Sometimes archaeological and historical sources contradict each other; on other occasions they reinforce one another. The overlapping of two differing disciplines has been a healthy development, invigorating study of a long-lost era through the publication of many volumes of good scholarship.

#### FOUR TOPICS OF CONSEQUENCE

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This book examines four major topics located at important points in the ancient Japanese past, defined in this case as the period until 800. The first issue is one of the oldest: the question of Yamatai. According to a third-century Chinese historian, somewhere in Japan was Yamatai, “the queen’s country,” an alliance of twenty-odd “countries” that paid tribute to the Central Kingdom. The location of this Yamatai has stumped Japanese scholars for centuries and continues to bedevil historians and archaeologists today. Two points of contention, the degree of political unity and the level of social and economic development of the archipelago, are implicit in the Yamatai debate.

The second problem is not as old as the controversy over Yamatai, but it is at least as laden with political meaning: what was the relationship between Japan and Korea from 350 to 700? Japanese written sources state that Japan conquered southern Korea and the Japanese court benefited from tributary items that flowed from the peninsula, but many Japanese and all North and South Korean scholars no longer accept this view. What does archaeology on both sides of the Korean Straits have to say about this interpretation? Does it support or refute the written sources?

The third subject too deals with Japan’s ties to the mainland. Commencing in the seventh century, the Japanese ruling class imported Chinese-style institutions to bolster its power; one of the best-known imports was the Chinese-style, symmetrical capital city. What continental metropolis served as the prototype for Japanese capitals? Were the Japanese recreations real cities, and if so, how were they erected? What can the attempt to apply this Chinese idea to

Japan tell scholars about the last two centuries of Japan's political and economic development?

The fourth topic continues the examination of the archipelago's apprenticeship to Chinese civilization between 645 and 800, but it relies on a different archaeological source. Scientists have excavated some 170,000 wooden tablets throughout Japan. These artifacts were used for official business, and they bear dates and other information that shed new light on old historical questions. How quickly and thoroughly did the court attempt to copy Chinese-style government? How did it adapt Chinese bureaucratic procedures and revenue arrangements to Japan? What were the economic foundations and composition of the Nara aristocracy, and how did they change with the implementation of Chinese-style law?

Although these four areas of inquiry may appear to have little in common, they were not chosen randomly. Two criteria guided these selections. First, each topic encompasses both written records and material evidence, thereby illuminating how historical archaeology has developed in Japan over the past thirty years. This means that I have left to other researchers the undocumented prehistoric age before A.D. 100, despite its significance and appeal. Second, each topic contains clues as to how Japan developed from a simple into a complex society, or perhaps from barbarism to civilization.

The creation and spread of complex societies are subjects that have engaged scholars throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Although there are many controversies, social scientists have agreed on a seminal definition that can be applied relatively well around the globe to groups as diverse as the Aztecs, the ancient Romans, the Guptas, and the West Africans. Complex society (also known by the more judgmental and therefore less satisfactory term "civilization") has occurred wherever one occupation—usually agriculture—has become so productive that a surplus accumulates, allowing some people to turn to other jobs such as soldiering, ruling, crafting goods, or praying to the gods.<sup>10</sup>

The degree and mix of specialization in each society depends on many factors. They may be similar or radically different in various areas, but usually the initial stages of complexity involve inventions, such as metallurgy and writing, and the erection of large monuments and urban centers.<sup>11</sup> Complex societies have social classes and are based on inequality. They have spread around the globe because they result in greater wealth and better control of the environment than the known alternatives.

Not every group has desired (or been productive enough) to settle down and become complex. Simple societies, where livelihoods such as hunting,

herding, and gathering prevail, have faced intense competition from their specialized neighbors. In some cases, simple societies have been overwhelmed by invasion; in others, some members became aware of the challenges from a more powerful and complex neighbor and copied that culture as far as their own economy, social structure, and other factors would permit. The eventual result over millennia has been the diffusion of complex cultural patterns to most areas of the world.

### OUTLINE OF JAPANESE BEGINNINGS

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The story of ancient Japan may be divided for the purposes of this book into three parts: prehistoric, protohistoric, and fully historic.<sup>12</sup> Prehistoric Japan, for which no written sources are extant, includes the traditional archaeological periods of the Palaeolithic (180,000?–10,500 B.C.) and Jōmon (conventionally 10,500–300 B.C.).<sup>13</sup> During these epochs, almost all inhabitants lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering. Jōmon people used polished stone tools, lived in pit dwellings, and built elaborate “rope-pattern” pots by hand. Jōmon natives had a lively religious life, buried their dead in garbage heaps of shells and bones, and practiced tooth pulling as a rite of passage. The population probably never exceeded 300,000. Jōmon culture thrived in eastern Honshu and Hokkaido; there are few Jōmon sites in the area west of modern Nagoya.

The Jōmon era may seem typical of Neolithic times in other parts of the world, but in fact it was not. To be sure, the Jōmon people used polished stone tools and a few practiced horticulture late in the period. But agriculture, which was the foundation of Neolithic societies in China, the Middle East, and Europe, remained undeveloped. Two reasons help to explain Japan’s relatively late adoption of farming: not only were hunting, fishing, and gathering such rich livelihoods that agriculture was an afterthought, but the nutrient-poor soil and limited plains area discouraged more settled occupations. Nonagricultural pursuits continued to flourish even into modern times, especially in mountainous regions.

Beginning in the fourth century B.C., the technologies of wet-rice agriculture and metallurgy entered northern Kyushu from southern Korea, initiating an epoch identified archaeologically as the Yayoi (conventionally 300 B.C.–A.D. 300). The effect of the new livelihood on western Japan was immediate, as population surged and settlements multiplied. Eastern Honshu resisted agriculture, and residents of Hokkaido relied mainly on hunting and fishing until the nineteenth century. The metals brought into the archipelago were first

iron and then bronze, reversing the order known in other parts of the world. Iron was used primarily for tools; bronze was cast into swords, halberds, and ritual bells. The immigrants who bore the new technologies were taller than the natives, and one may infer that both warfare and intermarriage took place between the two groups.<sup>14</sup>

The protohistoric age began after A.D. 100, when texts and artifacts begin to play equally important roles. An important theme of protohistoric Japan is state formation, a gradual and painful process. Until 300, Japan remained under the control of numerous regional chieftains, each ruling an area of 100 to 150 square kilometers.<sup>15</sup> These chiefs formed alliances, especially with hegemons of the Kinai (the Kyoto–Osaka–Nara area).<sup>16</sup> By the late third century, Kinai chiefs had started building large keyhole tombs and filling them with valuable goods. Archaeologists call the years between 300 and 645 the Tomb period (*kofun jidai*) after these impressive monuments.

The fourth century is typically characterized as a time of increasing political unity in the archipelago. Archaeologically, the Kinai-style keyhole tombs spread outward to southern Kyushu and to northern Honshu by the end of the 300s. Historically, this era comprises a “century of mystery,” for there is no contemporary written evidence. Myths recount stories of conquest and founding heroes, but scholars remain uncertain about the boundaries of the new state (or states) or the degree of centralized control.

Chinese histories record contact with Kinai hegemons from 421 to 502, the era of the Five Kings. According to Chinese annals, these Five Kings claimed suzerainty over numerous “countries” in eastern and western Japan and southern Korea. Historians believe that the leaders who dispatched missions to China ruled the Kinai and should be associated with truly mammoth tombs containing horse trappings, gold ornaments and crowns, massive amounts of iron tools and weapons, and pottery. Slowly an organized state structure with an aristocratic court was taking shape, but until the 500s succession wars were frequent. As a rule, the victor in these wars moved the palace away from the site of his predecessor, a custom that reduced the court’s stability.

The years from 500 until 645 mark the heyday of the Yamato state, named after the province in the Kinai where rulers presided over an increasingly sophisticated court. In this epoch, the government underwent rapid development due at least partly to influence from the continent. Sometime in the first half of the sixth century, Buddhism was introduced. The court granted to aristocrats and local notables titles (*kabane*) and surnames (*uji*) that indicated their status and function, and the court organized units (*tomo; be*) to supply goods and services to members of the ruling elite.<sup>17</sup> The monarch provided

legitimacy for the group, and the ruling ideology was first written down. Rulers also designated about 120 notables from other parts of Japan to be *kuni no miyatsuko* (“provincial servants”). The degree of centralized control is again an issue, but evidence suggests that a Yamato king could oust a rebellious notable and convert the area into a royal demesne (*miyake*).

State machinery underwent increasing elaboration from 645 to 800. A palace coup in 645, a disastrous military defeat in Korea in 663, and a civil war in 672 paved the way for an aggressive line of sovereigns who aspired to direct control over Japan’s land and people based on Chinese models. In 701, the court completed the first set of Chinese-style penal and civil statutes. The ruling class modeled its tax, military, inheritance, census, land tenure, bureaucratic, religious, police, and market systems after Chinese examples. The first major urban centers were designed and constructed with reference to Chinese cities. The court assimilated many aspects of Chinese culture, including music and the arts, writing, medicine, and costume. The plenitude of written sources makes the eighth century fully historic; from this point on, there is less dependence on archaeology to supply basic data. Intensive analysis of the four subjects noted here should lead to greater insight into how Japanese civilization developed.