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Kidder/Himiko and Japan's Elusive Chieftdom of Yamatai

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Introduction

Chinese historians, in meeting their obligations to document the activities of their dynasties or the debt they believed they owed to their predecessors, collected and eventually recorded information on their neighbors. This material became a store of useful data for managing political relations, trading guides, and military strategy.

Earlier historic events were sometimes used to justify later actions. In the case of Japan, two histories are particularly valuable: the *Hou Han shu* (History of Later Han; J: *Gokansho*), recording the period from AD 25 to 220, and a section of the *Sanguo zhi* (History of the Three Kingdoms; J: *Sangokushi*) called *Wei zhi* (Record of Wei; J: *Gishi Wajin-den*), chronicling their short history of AD 221 to 265. The Three Kingdoms were Wei (221–265), Wu (222–280), and Shu Han (221–264). The people occupying the Japanese islands at that time were known as Wo (J: Wa), and it appears that the Chinese writers did not then distinguish them from the residents of south Korea.

Within these accounts, along with descriptions of the political structure of several Wa “kingdoms” (*guo/koku*) and their environmental features, is an intriguing description of the dominant polity that the Japanese have traditionally called Yamatai. This political unit, perhaps best referred to as a chiefdom, was ruled by a woman known today as Himiko. Through magical means she controlled the people of Yamatai and about thirty other chiefdoms, and in 238 she initiated emissarial exchanges with the Wei court, giving the Chinese writers the primary reason to describe that neighbor.

Extant Japanese records, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, finished in 712 and 720, do not mention the name of Himiko, but the editors of at least the latter were familiar with the *Wei zhi* and believed that Himiko and the woman who was called the wife of Emperor Chūai, known posthumously as Jingū, were the same individual because they assigned Jingū to the years that Himiko was involved with the Chinese missions. This mistake went unrecognized until the entire question received serious study only two centuries ago.

The Chinese text created its own confusion. It was apparently not realized until even later that the directions or distances given for reaching Yamatai were incompatible and that, working from a modern map of east Asia, it would be impossible to reach Yamatai by following both. As a consequence, scholars were faced with the classic twofold riddle: Who was Himiko and where was the Yamatai that she governed?

These questions have haunted Japanese scholars for more than two hundred years, yet no common views on the problems have been reached. Progress was slow before World War II, but in the years of intellectual liberation that followed, as the economy improved and commercial and residential building took off, the mandatory archaeology opened up huge new fields. Not only was this the case in archaeology, but the booming economy boosted every academic discipline. Article and

book production reached astounding proportions in the 1970s and 1980s as literally hundreds of articles and books poured out on the issue. A complete bibliography cannot exist, but the one in this book will give some idea of the magnitude of the problem—and the impossibility of dealing with every viewpoint and theory so far proposed. Inevitably, one must be selective. Television, newspapers, and popular magazines never let the questions rest. Any “original” view received notice. One supposes that the media would feel greatly deprived of excitement if any “solutions” were to be found to the problems in this untidy jungle. Nevertheless, the divergent differences are now being narrowed, and it seems possible, given the present state of knowledge, to make a convincing case for the location of Yamatai.

My own interest in the Yamatai problems started in the early 1960s when I found a copy of John Young’s *The Location of Yamatai: A Case Study in Japanese Historiography, 720–1945*, although I do not recall even then knowing enough about the problems to have actually looked for the book.¹ Young’s study was so thoroughly researched one could begin from the 1945 platform he so carefully constructed. Nevertheless, to help the reader see the broader picture as a coherent and comprehensive whole and to understand how and where the lines were drawn at the end of World War II, I provide a retrospective of those developments. Later, in regard to locating Yamatai, critical landmark arguments of the postwar years will be outlined.

When time finally allowed, I had three aspects of a study in mind. The first was to work with the basic and commendable translation of the *Wei zhi* by Tsunoda and Goodrich that has been our standard fare for half a century, commenting on details with information from later studies and amending a modest number of places.² Archaeological data provide better interpretations of many points in the *Wei zhi* account. I had spent several years with that translation when it was suggested that a new translation would furnish an updated working base. This translation has been carefully examined by one Chinese and two Japanese scholars, and where a range of interpretations exists—and there are not a few—I take the responsibility for this version (see chapter 2).

Second, to consider Himiko’s era, which—archaeologically speaking—is the critical stage at the end of Yayoi and the beginning of the Kofun period.³ She died in 247 or 248. In political terms, the era involves the emergence of Yamato as an identifiable entity in which she must have played a part. Inasmuch as Himiko’s position was gained through her shamanic practices, a history of magic from its recognized beginnings opens insights into the manner in which shamans exercised their perceived supernatural powers and leads to a look at the way later writers viewed the nature of rulership at this time. Thinking that they had solved the problem in the Himiko equals Jingū equation and given her all she was due, the writers of the ancient Japanese chronicles seem to have been unaware that she was actually still there, described by them as a force behind the throne of the first or second emperor of the Kofun period. Her involvement with east Asian politics requires consideration of events transpiring outside Japan and the Japanese response to them.

To meet these objectives of updating the translation, analyzing the cultural and political conditions of the late Yayoi and early Kofun periods of which Himiko was

a part, and identifying the location of Yamatai as her arena of activity, it will be essential to look more deeply into the role of magic in early Japanese society and therefore to better understand why an individual with her qualifications had reached such a prominent position. Divination preceded every move, as described in both the *Wei zhi* and the Japanese accounts. The archaeology has provided good data on the artifacts of the practice. Bronze mirrors—a particular one eventually symbolizing the Sun Goddess, and a component of the imperial regalia—reinforced Himiko’s magical resources. A gift of one hundred from the Chinese court added exponentially to her power. Their importance cannot be overestimated in the paraphernalia of the magical arts, although some archaeologists prefer to see them as statistical artifacts in a political context. The validity of that archaeological view will be considered in the light of recent discoveries.

And third, to nominate the largest, most dynamic and cosmopolitan population center in the latter half of the third century AD as Yamatai, where the formalization of Yamato religious practices was taking place. Only archaeology, which by its very nature is an interdisciplinary study, provides this information.

In my view Himiko fits at the very point where the Yamato tribe formed its alliances and so had the reserves in manpower required to build the massive tombs. The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* attribute this stage of Yamato ascendancy to the reigns of emperors Sujin and Suinin, who kept palaces in the Makimuku area of the Nara Basin. The archaeology of this area will be dealt with in detail, and a case made for Himiko’s being described by later Japanese historians as a royal relative, either intentionally or otherwise. Officially, however, by assigning the dates of Himiko to Jingū, Chūai’s wife, they assumed that Himiko and Jingū were one and the same individual.

Along with the *Wei zhi* and a few details on early Japan that do not appear in that text but are in the *Hou Han shu*, it will be necessary to pick and choose useful information from the early Japanese literature. Archaeologists tend to regard the ancient Japanese texts as too biased and historically unreliable to be helpful, but it would be irresponsible not to use all available materials in examining this time period in Japan. The old literature is, in fact, a rich body of commentary on almost every aspect of daily life and thought. One looks for explanations for archaeological problems wherever they can be found—buried in the mythological stories or tucked into some historical descriptions. Although I see it less used this way, the archaeology may contribute to correcting the sequence of events as the writers claimed they occurred or bolster support for the manner in which certain relationships were described, such as those between Yamato and Izumo.

In regard to terminology, regardless of their distorted or inflated implications, I may speak of the “islands of Japan” when they were occupied by the Wa people, and use “emperor” for Yamato rulers before the title *tennō* was adopted by Temmu (r. 672–686). If the arguments for accuracy call for the use of terms of the time period, one reads such strings of names as chief of chiefs Iku-me-iri-hiko-i-sachi and Tarashi-nakatsu-hiko for emperors Suinin and Chūai. The unwieldiness precludes this. Centuries ago the Japanese discovered that such a litany of personal names could not be imposed on the public.⁴