THE JAPANESE

A History in Twenty Lives

CHRISTOPHER HARDING

'Skilled, ambitious, a marvellous study of a nation'
SUNDAY TIMES



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The Japanese

Christopher Harding is the author of the widely praised *Japan Story: In Search of a Nation*, described by Neil MacGregor as 'Masterly. How much I admired it, what a lot I learned from it and, above all, how very much I enjoyed it'. Harding teaches at the University of Edinburgh and frequently broadcasts on Radio 3 and Radio 4.

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First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2020
First published in Penguin Books 2022
001

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–99228–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To Kae, with love.

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A Note to the Reader

Japanese names appear in this book in the standard Japanese order of family name followed by given name. Macrons are used to indicate elongated vowel sounds except in the case of place names that are well established in English (e.g. Tokyo).

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Introduction

A beautiful day, like an English June day, but hotter. Though the Sakura (wild cherry) and its kin, which are the glory of the Japanese spring, are over, everything is a young, fresh green. Wooded hills, small picturesque valleys, clear blue wavelets brightened by the white sails of innumerable fishing-boats. Streams abound, and villages of wooden houses and temples with strangely curved roofs. It is all homelike, liveable, and pretty, the country of an industrious people. Not a weed is to be seen.

Isabella Bird, Unbeaten Tracks in Japan *(1880)*

The serving maid picked up slice after slice from this living fish, which, although alive, had been already carved. There is a refinement of barbaric cruelty in this which contrasts strangely with the geniality and loving nature of the Japanese. The miserable object with lustrous eye looks upon us while we consume its own body . . .

Christopher Dresser, Japan: Its Architecture, Art, and Art Manufactures *(1882)*

Who are the Japanese? To the Victorian-era travellers who launched and shaped the West's modern love affair with Japan, they appeared to be a people of polar opposites. The haughty samurai and the obsequious peasant inhabiting the same Edenic landscape. The kindly innkeeper and his fish-torturing staff. The demure and modest geisha wrapped in layer after layer of luxurious kimono, and the denizens of mixed-sex bathhouses – naked and shameless, laughing and leering.

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There followed a century of Western fascination and puzzlement, as Victorian expectations went largely unrevised. Distant in geography, culture and language, 'the Japanese' tended to be imagined en masse and in the abstract; bound at some level, it was assumed, to a basic consistency in their ideas and values – if only these could be accurately discerned. A mid twentieth-century generation struggled, as a result, to reconcile Japanese aggression in the Asia-Pacific with a culture of peaceful reflection – temples and shrines, gardens and lakes – so precious that Kyoto was passed over for atomic destruction in 1945. Post-war media portrayals of Japan took contrast and contradiction as their keynotes: kimono-clad women riding the futuristic bullet train; grey identikit salarymen wandering through noisy, neon-lit neighbourhoods devoted to fun, fantasy and joyful abandon.

Only with Japan's late twentieth-century emergence as a cultural superpower – manga, anime, film and pop, food, literature and video games – did a more nuanced picture begin to emerge: of diverse regions and neighbourhoods, classes and professions; competing ideologies and rival visions of the future. 'Who are the Japanese?' was steadily revealed as a question asked not only by outsiders, but by the Japanese themselves. In fact, it is the challenge and conundrum at the heart of almost two millennia of recorded history. How do you take a 3,000-kilometre-long archipelago, running from frozen wastelands in the north down to subtropical rainforest in the south, and make it 'Japan'? How do you persuade people who live in very different ways – their languages, loyalties and beliefs – to come together and call that place home? It is a task that has taxed some of the most influential figures in Japanese history: emperors and shoguns, shamans and warlords, poets and revolutionaries, scientists, artists and adventurers.

And it taxes Japan's leaders today, as the country's population ages and shrinks. Ever fewer workers struggle to support an ever larger proportion of the elderly and infirm – financially and physically. The choices are stark: more babies, more robots or more immigration. The third option challenges long-held ideas in Japan about 'the Japanese' as a reasonably homogenous bunch, a social or even spiritual whole. How does such a club adapt to welcome new members?

As the Japanese public and their politicians ponder the question

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'Who are the Japanese?' with an anxious eye to the future, this book asks the same question, looking back. One of the best ways to understand a country's history is to explore its questioning of itself. All the more so with a place like Japan, where talk is often held to be cheap – no one who is *kuchi bakari*, 'all mouth', can expect much respect – and where the greatest attention is paid instead to exemplary lives: ideas and ideals not merely thrown idly around, but embodied and tested.

The Japanese delves into twenty such lives: people who either pushed Japan's great self-questioning onwards, building and transforming the nation in the process, or who ended up reflecting in some profound way the changing world around them. Most have since become woven into Japan's national fabric, their accomplishments relived in stories, plays, songs, films and literature. Together, these twenty people and their times offer us an intimate introduction to a vast and compelling history.

We begin in Part One at the beginning, with the world – millions of years in the making – of the first known, named person in Japanese history: the shaman queen Himiko (*c.*170–248). We encounter Prince Shōtoku (573–621), celebrated for his welcoming into Japan of Chinese and Korean culture: writing, poetry and Confucian morality; the austere wonders of Buddhist art and architecture; and the foundations of the imperial court life that is still practised in Japan today. Emperor Kanmu (737–806) was one of Japan's most powerful and creative monarchs. Murasaki Shikibu (*c.*973–unknown) was its first – perhaps the *world*'s first – novelist, fictionalizing in *The Tale of Genji* the colourful Heian (Kyoto) court life that she knew so well.

Part Two takes us from the collapse of courtly Japan, through long years of civil war and regional rivalry, to the country's unification once again. The acclaimed political operator Hōjō Masako (1157–1225) kept a newly powerful class of samurai warriors in line, ensuring that her husband's legacy as Japan's first shogun lived on past his early death. Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262), 'St Shinran', helped to shift the focus of Buddhism in Japan away from the mountain-top exertions of a priestly elite and towards a simple, practical faith for all, with a premium placed on purity of heart. Two contrasting characters move us towards unification: the actor and playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) whose Nō plays became central to Japan's self-image as

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a nation of serious refinement; and Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), who combined strategy, newly imported firearms and a willingness to shed blood on an epic scale to begin knitting Japan's national community back together.

In Part Three, we enter the world of early modern Japan. The global voyages of Hasekura Tsunenaga (1571–1622?) reveal a country whose leaders were determined at first to embrace the world – seafaring Europeans in particular – but who soon decided to take a stricter approach to border control. This helped to foster a thriving popular entertainment culture in the heyday of Japan's Tokugawa shoguns, celebrated and satirized by the literary superstar Ihara Saikaku (1642–93). Sakamoto Ryōma (1835–67), a master swordsman and strategist, was part of a swashbuckling, revolutionary generation that helped Japan to begin making its way in a dangerous, hyper-competitive modern world. Kusumoto Ine (1827–1903) lived and worked through that period of great transition.

Part Four presents contrasting contributions to the raising up of a modern Japan, through to its downfall in 1945. Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931), the 'father of Japanese capitalism', helped to fund and steer momentous changes in the lives of the Japanese, while a mixed, confusing upbringing in Japan and the United States made the feminist educator Tsuda Umeko (1864–1929) an astute observer of the results. The pioneering chemist Ikeda Kikunae (1864–1936) tickled modern palates, at home and abroad, with *umami* (MSG), helping in the process to foster a fresh Japanese internationalism in science and commerce. Lastly, through the life of the poet and activist Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) we discover how easily cosmopolitanism can falter, in Japan's case giving way to a rethinking of its place in the world – and in Asia especially – that had devastating consequences.

A generation of Japanese who survived that devastation came to associate gruelling early post-war years with the child star Misora Hibari (1937–89) and her music, characterized by a cheerful optimism mixed with a fear of American entertainment wearing away at the Japanese soul. Part Five of *The Japanese* homes in on the power of culture in shaping Japan and its international image down to the present day. From Hibari we move on to the 'god of manga', Tezuka Osamu (1928–89), whose early, iconic creations coincided with Japan's

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rebirth across the 1950s and 1960s. Politicians still counted for something, of course, none more so than the 'shadow shogun' Tanaka Kakuei (1918–93) who became synonymous with the stunning yet somewhat shady successes of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has rarely been out of power since 1955.

We end on an uncertain symbol of a people passing through uncertain times. Owada Masako (1963–) gave up a promising career with Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to marry into the imperial family in the early 1990s, hoping to serve her country as a royal diplomat. Difficult years followed, for Masako as Crown Princess and for Japan as a whole, with a struggling economy, tense relationships in East Asia and a population cultured and comfortable, yet increasingly concerned about what the future might bring. Now, as Empress, Masako seeks to help Japan's oldest institution to do what it always has done, in different ways at different times: serve as a centre of gravity, a source of support, and part of the answer to the perennial question – 'Who are the Japanese?'

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The Japanese Archipelago and Mainland Asia

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PART ONE

From Heaven to Heian: Mythological Time to 1185

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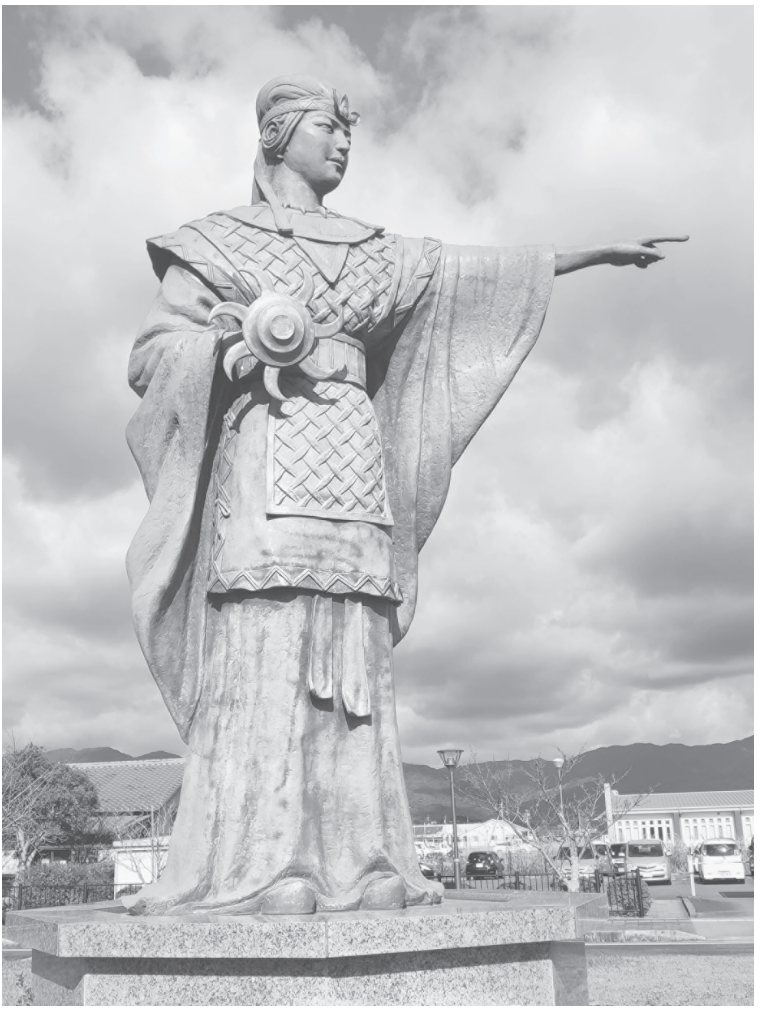
Himiko

(卑弥呼)

c.170–248

Shaman Queen

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Statue of Queen Himiko in Kanzaki City, Saga Prefecture, Japan.

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> The people agreed upon a woman for their ruler. Her name was Himiko. There were few who saw her. She had one thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink, and acted as her medium of communication. She resided in a palace surrounded by towers and stockades, with armed guards in a state of constant vigilance.

With these words, a late third-century Chinese chronicle called the *Records of Wei* (*Wei Chih*) gives us the first known, named person in Japanese history: a mysterious queen, ruling from fortified seclusion between around 190 and her death in around 248.

There was as yet no such place as 'Japan', no such people as 'the Japanese'. Instead, the islands of the archipelago were dotted with independent settlements, some of them rice-farming chiefdoms large enough to be called 'countries' by the Chinese. The greatest by far was Queen Himiko's realm of Yamatai. Hegemon over around thirty other chiefdoms, it stationed officials in each whose job it was to keep an eye on people and maintain them in what the Chinese chronicle describes as 'a state of awe and fear'.

Awe and fear of what, exactly, is not clear – but there are clues. The Chinese referred to Himiko's people as the 'Wa', using an ideograph whose meanings include 'dwarf-like' and 'obedient'. The former reflects the basic disdain with which Chinese observers treated all non-Chinese, not just the people of the archipelago. But the latter chimes to a degree with what Chinese writings and the archaeological record reveal of how the Wa lived. Theirs was a world of powerful forces, seen and unseen, amidst which one fared best by knowing one's place. Weapons represented one sort of force, wealth and social status another. A third was an intelligent vitality, coursing through nature and capable of shaping human affairs.

Himiko seems to have enjoyed command of a kind over the first two of these forces, and a shamanic connection with the last. Much

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about her life is obscure, and will probably always remain so. But her era and its origins offer some first suggestive glimpses of the people who would one day become 'the Japanese'.

*

Himiko's world was 15 million years in the making. It began with the splitting off from the Eurasian continent of an archipelago some 3,000 kilometres in length, consisting eventually of four large islands alongside thousands of smaller ones. At least two land bridges linked across to these islands, including one from Siberia in the north and one from the Korean peninsula in the south. Alternately submerged and revealed, as fluctuating global temperatures caused sea levels to rise and fall, these bridges made of the water between islands and continent at times a sea and at times a vast open lake.

Across these land bridges travelled life of all kinds. The archipelago's richly varied climate – subarctic in the north, down to subtropical in the south – combined with successive phases of worldwide warming and cooling to support, at one time or another, populations of woolly mammoths, elephants, horses and giant deer, brown bears and bison, moose and wolves, monkeys and tigers.

It supported human beings, too, for at least 30,000 years before Himiko's society arose. They lived for the most part on the largest of the islands, today's Honshū, avoiding its thickly forested mountainous spine in favour of the more hospitable coastal plains. There were also populations further south, down to what are now the islands of Okinawa, and to the north in Hokkaidō. These earliest peoples used stone tools, including edge-ground axes, to hunt and forage in the vicinity of the rocky shelters they called home.

From around 14,500 BCE, life began to change. Across more and more parts of the archipelago, people could be found storing and boiling food in clay pots. It proved to be a valuable innovation as large mammals dwindled in number and then disappeared, the result of a warmer environment and more effective hunting techniques – using domesticated dogs alongside bows and arrows. Smaller game helped to keep meat on the menu, and the art of fishing with nets, hooks and

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harpoons became highly developed. But nuts and berries became more important than ever, along with plant-life so tough that it was only edible as part of a Neolithic stew.

This 'Jōmon' culture, named after the rope patterns found on its pottery, consisted early on of small pots carried around by hunter-gatherers on the move. These gave way to larger vessels as people started to settle down into communities of between five and several dozen simple thatched pit homes, arranged in a horseshoe shape around a central meeting area. Clothes were created from hemp, mulberry bark and animal skin, while rafts and dug-out canoes were developed to help communities trade with one another by sea. Most of these early mariners clung closely to the coastline. But some – adventurous spirits or poor navigators – ended up on the Korean peninsula, around 200 kilometres from the western coast of Kyūshū, the most southerly of the archipelago's four main islands.

It was via links with mainland Asia that two fundamental elements were added to life on the archipelago, preparing the way for societies like Himiko's. The first was rice. Cultivated along China's Yangtze River since 5000 BCE, it entered the archipelago in short-grain form around 500 BCE, quite possibly brought by migrants from the Korean peninsula. Alongside revolutionizing people's diets and requiring of them new, cooperative farming techniques, rice came to serve as a form of wealth and a source of social status: you could accumulate it, store it and live well off the proceeds.

You might, now and again, also have to fight for it. And this was where the archipelago's second great Asian import came in handy: metallurgy, in particular iron and bronze objects, along with the techniques and raw materials required to create them. Far into the future, people on these islands digging deep for evidence of their ancestors would find swords embedded in badly damaged – sometimes decapitated – skeletons. One individual, either spectacularly unlucky or stubbornly unwilling to die, was found with no less than a dozen arrows protruding from what was left of his body.

This new era, beginning around 500 BCE, became known as 'Yayoi' after an area in eastern Japan where examples of its distinctive pottery were later found. It saw a falling population on the archipelago start to

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rise again, thanks both to rice cultivation and the use of iron, not just for dispensing with enemies, but for fashioning better farming tools. While some communities retreated to high altitudes, possibly in the hope of avoiding aggressive lowland neighbours, successful settlements on the plains grew to hundreds and later thousands of people, protecting their perimeters with moats, embankments of earth and watchtowers.

Himiko's time had come, on an archipelago that now boasted somewhere between half a million and 4 million inhabitants. Her chiefdom of Yamatai, built on warfare and wealth, was a place where the difference between high and low could be immense. A rich man might have four or five wives, dress in silk, live in a large hut with a floor raised some way off the ground, and adorn himself and his home with precious bronze objects – from bracelets to mirrors. Poorer sorts would move to the side of the road to let him pass. They would pay him taxes. And if they had to talk with him, they would do so while squatting or kneeling, both hands pressed to the ground. 'This', concluded a seemingly rather impressed Chinese observer featured in the *Records of Wei*, 'is the way they show respect.'

The Chinese also found the climate sympathetic. Located at the meeting point of several tectonic plates, much of the archipelago was always at risk of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, to add to a drenching summer monsoon and mighty autumnal typhoons. But all this notwithstanding, residents of the archipelago's mid-section, from northern Kyūshū up into Honshū, enjoyed an annual cycle of four distinct and generally bearable seasons. The Chinese declared Himiko's chiefdom a 'warm and mild' place, where a person could go about barefoot and live off vegetables all year round if they wished – though rice, fish and meat were of course available too, all served on bamboo trays and eaten with the fingers. Men were dressed in spun fabrics that fastened at the side, while women donned simple, single coverlets by slipping their heads through a hole in the centre. There was alcohol aplenty, but little evidence of life getting out of hand. 'Women are not loose in morals, or jealous,' says the *Records of Wei*; 'there is no theft, and litigation is infrequent.'

Most people may simply have been too tired to transgress. Chinese observers found them busy in their fields, cultivating grains, rice and

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hemp, alongside the mulberry trees required to keep silkworms. They spun, they wove and they hunted. Men went diving for seafood, tattooing their faces and bodies to ward off dangerous or troublesome sea-creatures. Anyone with enough energy left to consider breaking Himiko's 'strict and stern' laws would be mindful of the consequences. A light offence could lose a man his wife and children 'by confiscation'. A more serious infraction would see him, his household and some of his extended family 'exterminated'.

Here was a place tightly governed, and marked by a social hierarchy so vivid and entrenched that, in the words of the *Records of Wei*, 'some men are vassals of others'. When Himiko sent envoys to China in 238, amongst her gifts to the Wei Emperor were ten 'slaves', possibly prisoners of war: four male and six female. Chinese chroniclers shared with the Wa a low sense of the worth of such people, itemizing them in their records alongside two pieces of cloth, 'each twenty feet in length'.

The woman addressed by the great Wei Emperor as 'friend' and 'Queen of the Wa' was around twenty years old when she came to power, in 190 CE or thereabouts. Himiko had somehow emerged on top after a period of war, but no one knows whether she seized that power or was given it, and whether she ruled directly or preferred to delegate. She seems never to have married, but the *Records of Wei* mentions a younger brother who 'assisted her in ruling the country'. It may be that he dealt with day-to-day affairs while she was left alone and aloof to do what few others could: commune with forces in and beyond nature, for the good of her realm.

Little is known of Himiko's appearance, but her people produced textiles using looms while trading materials, technologies and fashions with communities on the continent. So Himiko may well have worn a one-piece belted tunic and long underskirt similar to those found in parts of the Asian mainland, sometimes swapping them for items that she is mentioned in the *Records of Wei* as receiving from the Wei Emperor: white silk, alongside brocade of blue and crimson.

The Chinese regarded Himiko as a shaman of extraordinary power, helping to deliver Yamatai out of chaos and into peace by using 'magic and sorcery' to 'bewitch' the population. This places her in a

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long tradition of shamans on the archipelago, stretching back perhaps as far as the middle of the Jōmon era when evidence first emerges that is suggestive of people seeking to reach out to spirits or energies with whom they share the world. Small figurines were crafted in clay, up to 30 centimetres high, with exaggerated eyes, breasts and buttocks, alongside heavy bellies. Known as *dogū*, some were given pride of place atop piles of stones. A number appear to have been deliberately marked or smashed, with pieces buried in separate locations: rituals, possibly, of injury, burial and exhumation that were intended to parallel or even influence cycles of death and rebirth – and with them the fertility of crop and creature. By the late Jōmon era, some human skeletons were being marked with red ochre and reburied in flexed positions, the paint suggesting blood, or a life force, alongside the completion of a life cycle from a baby curled up in sleep to an adult curled up in death.

Women or men who specialized in rituals like these may have been the forebears of the shamans of Himiko's day, one of whose most important roles was to guarantee the food supply. It is thought that they would call down a spirit to inhabit some feature of the natural landscape – a tree, a mountain or a waterfall – thereby giving that spirit a form in which people could worship and placate it, in the hope of avoiding disaster and persuading nature to cooperate. Other rituals were performed at structures used for rice storage. Raised off the ground to protect the crop, these designs came over time to signify sacred space.

Whether out in her chiefdom or within the walls of her palace, Himiko may well have used bronze bells and mirrors in her rituals – possibly hanging them from her belt as a sign of status. Bells have been found from her era whose designs include depictions of shamans in ecstatic states, while the worn backs of excavated bronze mirrors suggest that they were hung about a shaman's person as a sign of their status. Himiko is said to have received one hundred such mirrors as a gift from the Wei Emperor. The people of the archipelago had yet to produce a written account of themselves and their place in the world. But when they eventually did, a few centuries after Himiko, mirrors were revealed as enjoying pride of place, accompanying shamanic rituals involving music and dance.

At some sacred sites from Himiko's time, mirrors and bells have been found grouped alongside bronze weapons – an indication, perhaps, that

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Himiko was not unique, but rather was one of the greatest of a powerful caste of people: leaders in whom political and shamanic power was combined, overseeing a culture in which 'obedience' was a matter not just of following human rules but of living in line with the larger order of things.

Alongside Himiko's power, her subjects' behaviour and what they appeared to believe about the world fascinated Chinese observers. When someone died, the Wa would mourn for at least ten days. They would wail and lament; sing, drink and dance. Then, at the end of it all, family members would all take a purifying bath. Purity and pollution seem to have been central elements in Yamatai life in all sorts of ways, from the apparently sacred status of some rivers, springs and waterfalls to the way that lengthy and uncertain sea voyages across the archipelago were planned:

> They select a man who does not comb his hair, does not rid himself of fleas, lets his clothing get as dirty as it will, does not eat meat, and does not lie with women. This man behaves like a mourner and is known as the 'mourning keeper'. When the voyage meets with good fortune, they all lavish on him slaves and other valuables. In case there is disease or mishap, they kill him, saying that he was not scrupulous in observing the taboos.

People also used divination, to seek understanding and to reconcile themselves with the world. This included scapulimancy: the shoulder-blade of a deer would be placed in a fire, a person's dilemma described, and then the pattern of fissures formed in the baked remains would be examined for signs of what ought to be done. The choice of deer bone, and the prevalence of deer imagery on Yayoi-era pottery and bronze bells, suggest that this particular animal was regarded as special. This was certainly the case a few centuries later, when some of the archipelago's earliest writings featured stories of rice seeds being planted in deer's blood and miraculously germinating overnight.

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By whatever combination of earthly and otherworldly power she achieved, Himiko seems to have presided over a long and peaceful

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interlude in Yamatai's history. After her death, around 248, her people are said to have fallen quickly into conflict once again. 'A king was placed on the throne,' claims the *Records of Wei*, 'but the people would not obey him ... assassination and murder followed.' Order was restored only when Himiko's niece, a girl of thirteen, was made ruler of Yamatai. People may have regarded her as sharing something of Himiko's nature and powers, and thus capable of rescuing their world from chaos once again.

Himiko was an awesome presence in death, as she had been in life: a burial mound some 145 metres in diameter was constructed for her tomb. No evidence has so far been found that human sacrifice was ever practised on the archipelago, so it is probably less a matter of historical fact than a measure of her greatness in Chinese eyes that the *Records of Wei* has the Queen of the Wa being joined on her journey into the next world by no fewer than one hundred of her attendants.

That tomb has not yet been found, and the precise location of Yamatai remains a mystery. Read literally, third-century Chinese directions for getting there would land a person somewhere out in the Pacific Ocean. Read with a little more leeway for distance and detail, two strong contenders emerge – both of them on dry land, and both with implications for the origins of 'Japan' and 'the Japanese'.

The first possibility links Himiko with her people's recent past. If her remains lie at a site on the island of Kyūshū, as some claim, that places Yamatai close to the entry point for the continental imports and expertise that helped to give rise to Yayoi culture. The second possibility links Himiko instead to Honshū, and to the future. From central regions of this largest island in the archipelago were soon to emerge a series of extraordinary achievements in art, architecture, poetry, religion, law and statecraft, for which the people of the islands would become known first in Asia and later around the world.

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2

Prince Shōtoku

(聖徳太子)

573–621

Founding Father

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Prince Shōtoku, with his two sons.
Woodblock reproduction of an eighth-century painting.

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> [His mother] was suddenly delivered of him without effort. He was able to speak as soon as he was born, and was so wise when he grew up that he could attend to the [legal] suits of ten men at once and decide them all without error. He knew beforehand what was going to happen . . .

Prince, war leader, statesman. Seer, scholar, patron of the arts. A gentleman, a humanitarian, and an easy birth to boot. The man known to posterity as Prince Shōtoku often appears less as a historical figure than a character in a fairy tale. In many ways that is exactly what he was. His wondrous deeds come down to us for the most part via one of the archipelago's oldest works of literature. And we cannot be entirely sure that he ever existed.

And yet the 'Prince of Holy Virtue' commands our attention because all the stories told about him are, in their essentials, true. They go right to the heart of a remarkable transformation taking place across the sixth and seventh centuries in central Honshū: the coming together of powerful families, disparate gods and ideas from near and far in the fashioning of the archipelago's first recognizable state.

Celebrated as that state's founding father, Prince Shōtoku didn't so much create it as find himself created *by* it, becoming a hook on which it hung its most precious claims about itself. Above all, where this new state owed an enormous debt to Chinese and Korean civilization – for its politics and poetry, its laws and religion, its food, clothing and architecture – the Prince is recalled as a cultural diplomat of rare judgement and vision. He is the archipelago's first great integrator-in-chief. His life takes us from settlements and chiefdoms to the very cusp of 'Japan'.

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Prince Shōtoku's origins lie in Queen Himiko's demise. In the decades following her death around 248 CE, burial mounds of the kind in which she was interred began to multiply. These *kofun* ('ancient graves') were built to house great leaders' wooden or stone coffins, alongside the tools and treasures – swords, shoes, mirrors, jewellery – that marked their status in this life and may have been thought useful in the next. *Kofun* became progressively grander over time until one appeared around the middle of the 400s that was nearly 500 metres long, 300 metres wide, and rose thirty-five metres above the surrounding landscape. Known as the Daisen Kofun, from the air this awesome structure looks like a keyhole – a circle atop a triangle – set amidst lush greenery and surrounded by three broad moats. It may be the final resting place of 'Nintoku', one of the greatest leaders of a chiefdom in the Yamato basin, in south-central Honshū, which across the fourth and fifth centuries was expanding and steadily consolidating its status as regional hegemon.

Tall figurines called *haniwa*, crafted from reddish-brown clay and arrayed along the external slopes of burial mounds – perhaps as a form of spiritual protection – give us a flavour of how this power was accrued. Farmers brandish hoes. Women carry water vessels on their heads. Whether this up-and-coming Yamato chiefdom was an outgrowth of Himiko's Yamatai or a geographically distant realm that rose as hers receded, it relied on the extraordinary wealth that came from controlling richly fertile tracts of rice land. Horses saddled for journeys, and men helmeted and armoured for war, reveal the serious military capability purchased with the proceeds. Other *haniwa* suggest a regime that prospered by honouring the spirits and making alliances, often intermarrying with smaller but strategically important chiefdoms. We find female shamans with ritual headdresses and mirrors; musicians and wrestlers.

By the turn of the sixth century, these Yamato chiefs had taken to calling themselves 'Great Sovereigns' (*ōkimi*), binding their allies ever closer by bestowing upon them lucrative – and hereditary – roles and titles in their own administration. In this way, wealth and power began to depend more upon family, or 'clan', than territory. And what started out as a confederation of chiefdoms, with Yamato at its head, steadily

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morphed into a single polity stretching all the way from Kyūshū in the south-west up into central Honshū.

Never before had so much of the archipelago come under the control, however tentative, of a single leadership. Yet life at the royal court, moving from place to place around the Yamato heartland, was fragile and fractious. The 'Great Sovereigns' were rarely so great that they didn't have to worry about intrigue, murder and violent uprising at the hands of the influential cluster of rival clans now gathered close around them. How, then, to keep the show on the road? How to govern on this scale? How to gain and maintain legitimacy amongst people up and down the archipelago, and even beyond?

Finding solutions to these problems proved to be the work of two long and frequently bloody centuries, culminating in two great creative acts in the early 700s. The first was the building of a capital city in 710, at a place called Nara. The second was the finalizing, under official auspices, of two chronicles: the *Record of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*) in 712 and the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon Shoki*) in 720. The oldest surviving pieces of writing to come out of the archipelago, neither offered a straightforward chronology of the Yamato chiefdom's rise. They were both less and much more than that. Combining myth, history and high ideals, they furnished the people of the archipelago with some of their earliest exemplars, their founding heroes and heroines, while striving above all to answer that profound, perennial question – 'Who are we?'

The groundwork had been laid in the centuries since Himiko, as some of the mysterious, impersonal forces with which she communed steadily acquired names, functions and favoured features of the landscape – often great rocks or trees – which they were thought to inhabit on a seasonal or a more or less permanent basis. Clan heads linked themselves with local spirits, or *kami*, taking personal responsibility for the rituals that ensured adequate rainfall and good harvests. Some went as far as 'adopting' particular *kami* as ancestors, with the Yamato clan choosing a female solar deity called Amaterasu. She was worshipped at Ise on the eastern coast of south-central Honshū, at a site facing towards the rising sun.

The Yamato clan then went one very significant step further. They

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took a rich oral tradition of *kami* stories from around the archipelago and wove them into a single fabric, producing in effect a family history, running from the moment of creation down through generations of *kami*, including Amaterasu, into their own times. This became the substance both of the *Record of Ancient Matters*, which bursts with poetry, song and saucy anecdote, and the *Chronicles of Japan*, with its attempt at a more sober ordering of time – closer to the Chinese chronicles in which Queen Himiko had featured.

The 'Great Sovereigns' now began to style themselves as 'Heavenly Sovereign': *tennō,* usually rendered in English as 'emperor'. The *Chronicles of Japan* read this new self-designation right back into the distant past. It described an Age of the Gods giving way to a line of divine emperors of Japan, beginning with the mythical Emperor Jimmu in the seventh century BCE. From 201 CE to 269, an Empress Jingū was said to have ruled the land, following the death of her husband Chūai, the fourteenth emperor. The compilers of the *Chronicles of Japan* equated Jingū with the 'Queen of the Wa' mentioned in the *Records of Wei*, sidestepping potential complications by avoiding any use of the name Himiko. By the 500s and 600s, rulers begin to appear in the chronicle for whom there is strong historical evidence.

Allied clans of the Yamato were worked into this grand mythohistorical mix. Their place in the earthly pecking order found itself mirrored in the position of their adopted clan *kami*, within a hierarchical pantheon that featured Amaterasu at its apex. There was always the risk in such a strategy that allies – both human and divine – might feel underrated or under threat. For all that the *Record of Ancient Matters* and the *Chronicles of Japan* treated Yamato rule as a cosmic inevitability, they also hinted at serious bumps along the road as the new state coalesced. It is at just such a moment of crisis that we first encounter Prince Shōtoku, working his diplomatic magic.

As told in the *Chronicles of Japan*, the trouble began in 552, when an envoy from the Korean kingdom of Paekche arrived at the Yamato court bearing an impressive gold and copper statue of the Buddha, along with a collection of scriptures.

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A thousand years had passed, by this point, since the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was said to have laid out his 'Four Noble Truths' at a deer park near Varanasi: namely, that human existence is a mass of suffering and frustration; that our appetites and attachments make it so; we can end this situation; and the means of doing so is the Noble Eightfold Path. Centuries of contact with other Indian and Chinese ideas had helped to transform these insights into an enormously rich and varied set of cosmologies, rituals and art forms. But aside from perhaps a few pockets of practice here and there, Buddhism was unknown on the archipelago. And it was controversial from the start. The *Chronicles of Japan* reports that opinion amongst powerful families at court was divided, in 552, over whether or not to welcome the newcomer. The Mononobe clan feared the wrath of the native gods, the *kami*, while the rival Soga clan argued – successfully – that Buddhism should be adopted on a trial basis. Members of their clan would perform rituals in front of this new statue, and see what happened.

What happened was a disastrous epidemic, allowing the Soga's opponents to claim that the *kami* were indeed offended by this interloper. The statue was duly thrown into a canal and a newly built pagoda was burned to the ground. A second attempt at adoption in 584 again met with natural disaster. This time a Buddhist image, a pagoda and a temple were all set on fire, while three Buddhist nuns were stripped and flogged.

There was politics at play here. The Mononobe's influence at court rested on their specialist ritual role worshipping the *kami*. The Soga clan, for their part, seem to have been descended from some of the many Korean migrants who brought with them to Yamato valuable expertise in everything from metallurgy and medicine to irrigation and administration. The Soga perhaps saw in Buddhism another element of the advanced culture of the peninsula, to be welcomed like the rest. For the Mononobe, here was an immigrant god, sponsored by an immigrant clan – and both were quite possibly after their jobs.

In the *Chronicles of Japan*'s version of events, it is just as hostility between the Soga and Mononobe descends into bloodshed in 587 that Prince Shōtoku appears, quite literally riding to the rescue. He is

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said to have been born in 573, to parents with both Yamato and Soga blood running through their veins: the great sovereign Yōmei (reigned 585–7) and his consort Princess Anahobe no Hashihito. The *Chronicles of Japan* refers to Prince Shōtoku as 'Prince Umayado', a nickname of sorts relating to the story that his mother's effortless delivery of him occurred near to a stable door (*umayado*). The teenage Prince is depicted now taking to the battlefield on horseback, fighting for the Soga in a short but epoch-making conflict. As enemy arrows rain down, and the Soga are pushed back for a third time, the young Prince thrusts himself forward. 'Will we be beaten?' he cries. 'Let us make a vow!' With that, he cuts down a tree, whittles tiny images of four Buddhist gods known as the Heavenly Kings, places them in his top-knot, and proceeds to pray:

> If we are now made to gain the victory over the enemy, I promise faithfully to honour the Four Heavenly Kings, guardians of the world, by erecting to them a temple with a pagoda.

The tide of battle abruptly turns. The Soga forces win out. The promised temple is built, and the Prince now begins to emerge as the leading light in a period of Buddhist-inspired enlightenment across the Yamato kingdom.

The puzzle of how closely Prince Shōtoku's legend fits a real historical figure, who achieved some or all of the things with which he is credited, may never be solved. But the Soga clan do indeed seem to have enjoyed ascendancy after 587, capable in 593 of placing their favoured candidate on the throne. The *Chronicles of Japan* refers to her as 'Empress Suiko', although the title of *tennō* ('Heavenly Sovereign') was probably not in regular use at this point. According to the *Chronicles of Japan*, Prince Shōtoku was her nephew, appointed as regent by her in 594 and granted 'general control of the Government . . . entrusted with all the details of administration'.

The Prince's battlefield vow in 587 proved that by bringing in new, Buddhist gods Yamato was not risking its divine protection, but rather reinforcing it. Where rulers like Himiko had interceded with forces or *kami* for the protection and prosperity of their realms, the role of Yamato sovereigns was now expanded to include the worship of Buddhist deities to the very same ends. In practice, much of this

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work was delegated to Buddhist monks and nuns, who recited sutras at the temples that began to spring up around the country. Some forty or more were commissioned during Prince Shōtoku's lifetime alone, the most famous being Hōryū-ji. Said to have been completed under the auspices of the Prince himself in 607, it later burned down and was rebuilt in the late 600s or early 700s. Hōryū-ji went on to become a centre for the veneration of Prince Shōtoku, celebrated in modern times as the world's oldest wooden building.

Cosmic protection was to remain the primary role of Buddhism for many years to come. It would be a while before it evolved into a religion of the people. But the impact of the new temple complexes on people's imaginations was nevertheless enormous. With a network of shrines to the *kami* yet to develop, these were some of the first permanent structures in the archipelago to be dedicated to ritual worship. A typical temple complex consisted of several heavy wooden structures, each topped with a cascade of tiles, situated within a walled enclosure. One of these buildings would be a multistorey pagoda, housing sacred relics and tall enough to dominate the surrounding landscape.

These complexes, including colourful, awe-inspiring temple interiors, were based on Korean and Chinese designs. Many were actually built by Korean hands, with Buddhist monks doubling as carpenters and wood-carvers, roof-tile makers, sculptors and wall-painting artists. Builders, buildings and the rituals that went on within – the wearing of robes, the use of incense and chanting – combined to make a deep impression, putting down permanent cultural roots.

Prince Shōtoku is credited with making all of this possible by replacing ad hoc continental contacts up to this point with something far more systematic, establishing relations around the year 600 with a newly reunified China under the Sui dynasty. Alongside priestly and practical expertise, the Prince drew deeply and thoughtfully on Chinese and Korean scholarship – in Buddhism, classical Chinese philosophy, history, law and administration. According to the *Chronicles of Japan* and the cult that grew up around his memory, Prince Shōtoku was one of very few people in Yamato to see beyond Buddhism's ritual potential and appreciate its philosophical depths. He

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delivered lectures on Buddhism at the Empress's request – one talk apparently lasted for three days – and composed sutra commentaries that were later sent to China as part of diplomatic missions.

One of the most celebrated products of all this learning was the archipelago's first constitution, credited to the Prince in 604, though thought in fact to have been the work of a later generation. Consisting of seventeen articles, it was less a legal document than a series of principles on which an ideal state should be based. They included harmony and good faith, the acceptance of differing views and the recognition of merit. Feuding and gluttony were to be strenuously avoided, as were flattery, covetous desire, sycophancy and anger. Government officials were enjoined to place the greatest value on hard work, public-spiritedness, 'decorous behaviour' and open debate. Above all, people were encouraged to show reverence for Buddhism and for imperial commands.

These were more than mere airy ideals. Power in Yamato depended upon family, spanning blood ties and claims of godly descent. Prince Shōtoku was suggesting something revolutionary: that leadership and privilege should henceforth be conferred on the basis of merit and moral conduct instead. He instituted, for court officials, a Chinese-style system of 'cap-ranks' similar to one that was in use in Korean kingdoms at this time. There were twelve in all, each named after a Confucian principle – virtue, benevolence, propriety, sincerity, justice, and knowledge – and each distinguished from the others by the design of the silk cap worn by a person of that rank.

Anyone aspiring to rise through the new ranks would require, on top of the personal qualities laid out by Prince Shōtoku, a familiarity with Chinese. The lingua franca of East Asian Buddhism, it was also essential to continental statecraft and diplomacy. From the Prince's time onwards Yamato saw a rapid increase in Chinese literacy amongst the courtly elite, making possible the compilation of the *Chronicles of Japan* (in literary Chinese) and the *Record of Ancient Matters* (in a more experimental linguistic blend of Chinese mixed with an early attempt to render spoken Japanese in Chinese script).

Renewed contact with China had all sorts of other impacts besides. Courtiers began to adopt Chinese clothing: for women, a tunic emphasizing a flowing, plaited skirt beneath; for men, a loose, longer tunic

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with a stand-up collar, atop a pair of trousers tied with a sash. Imported Chinese dress codes meant that, as with the administrative caps, certain colours could be worn only by people of a certain status. Early in the 700s, a new 'clothing code' required that all robes be fastened left over right, according to Chinese practice – the origins, some have argued, of what would one day become the kimono.

The archipelago now embarked on a long-term love affair with Chinese styles of poetry. A highlight of diplomatic banquets, the composition of short lines capturing a moment or a mood became a source of cultured competition at court. A few decades after the *Record of Ancient Matters* and the *Chronicles of Japan* were completed, the first poetry anthology appeared: *The Ten Thousand Leaves* (*Man'yōshū*), featuring more than 4,000 poems composed between the mid-600s and mid-700s and taking for their subject matter the lives of courtiers and the coarser-born alike. The islands, of course, had their own pre-existing poetic traditions. But as in ritual and statecraft, so in the worlds of fashion and literary pursuits the great theme of this era was the integration of the foreign and the domestic.

This was also the case for music and dance. Native traditions included *kami* songs, folk songs and drinking songs, alongside singing competitions that would end in carnal revelry. Accompaniment was provided by varying combinations of flutes, drums, bells and rattles. To these domestic traditions was added – probably as early as the 400s, but gathering pace during and immediately after Prince Shōtoku's era – a range of new instruments, songs and dances from mainland Asia. Within the Prince's lifetime the most important newcomer, from Paekche, was *gigaku*. Taught at Buddhist temples and performed at court and elsewhere, this was dance-drama using brightly coloured masks of animals, including lions and horses, alongside famous historical figures and caricatures of barbarians and kings. Later on came a form of dance called *bugaku*, with more of a narrative focus, accompanied by the koto, a horizontal stringed instrument that was laid on the floor and plucked.

The Prince is said to have made a modest musical contribution of his own, burnishing in the process his Chinese-style credentials as a man of virtue and filial values. One day in 613 he was walking along

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when he noticed a starving man lying in the road. He stopped and gave him food and drink. Taking off his own robe and covering the man with it, he wished him peace and composed for him a song of lament:

Alas! for
The wayfarer lying
Hungered for rice . . .
Art thou become
Parentless?
Hast thou no lord
Flourishing as a bamboo?
Alas! for
The wayfarer lying
Hungered for rice.

When the man died not long afterwards, Prince Shōtoku had a burial mound built for him. Suspecting that this had been no ordinary human being, the Prince sent one of his attendants back to check the mound. The tomb was found to be empty, with only the Prince's robe remaining. Writers in later years linked this story to those of Jesus Christ and the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma, both of whom left empty tombs and appeared to people after their deaths. Some went further, wondering whether the Prince's many talents might have extended to helping bring the dead back to life.

As if to counter any impression that Prince Shōtoku was responsible for too slavish an approach to continental culture, his legend extends to one final celebrated act. The Chinese at this point still regarded their neighbours across the water – the 'Wa', using the same demeaning ideograph as always – as a vassal people. Given all that the Yamato kingdom was achieving, this would clearly no longer do. So around 608 the Prince drafted a letter for Empress Suiko to send to her counterpart in China. It began with the words: 'The Child of Heaven [*tenshi*] of the land where the sun rises sends a letter to the Child of Heaven of the land where the sun sets.' Other sources credit the Prince with conjuring the term later chosen by the Yamato

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sovereigns to refer to themselves – 'Heavenly Sovereign' (*tennō*) – and with trying it out for size on the Chinese around this time.

The Yamato kingdom had not yet formally adopted the name 'Nihon' ('root of the sun'), the appellation which, passing through various Asian and European languages, eventually gave the world 'Japan'. And given the vantage point of mainland Asia, the 'land where the sun rises' could be interpreted as no more than a geographical observation. But there were already connotations here of cosmic importance – of a newcomer destined to outshine an old-timer and, above all, the audacious assumption of parity between the two sovereigns. The Chinese Emperor appears to have understood. 'This letter from the barbarians', he is said to have complained to one of his staff, 'contains improprieties. Do not call it to my attention again.'

*

What some refer to as the broad 'Yamato period', beginning around the mid-200s with grand burial mounds suggestive of up-and-coming chiefdoms, gave way in 710 to the 'Nara period', named after the location of an impressive new imperial capital established that year. Laid out on a Chinese-style grid pattern and featuring buildings with stone bases and tiled roofs, the archipelago's first great capital city became home to 100,000 people – out of a national population of around 6 million. When the *Chronicles of Japan* was completed ten years later, in 720, it confirmed Prince Shōtoku as the person who had laid the city's cultural and political foundations.

Nara became the focal point of the sort of centralized and professionally managed bureaucratic state, based on Chinese-inspired criminal and administrative codes, that the Prince had envisaged. Government was split into two branches. The Great Council of State (Dajōkan) featured a Chancellor, Ministers of the Left and the Right (each responsible for various specific ministries) and four senior counsellors. The Office of Deities (Jingi-kan) managed rituals and shrines for the *kami*. A parallel network of Buddhist temples was meanwhile emerging, home to monks and nuns who were regarded essentially as state bureaucrats to be trained, regulated and charged with reciting sutras for the good of the realm.

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The realm, encompassing the southern two-thirds of Honshū and most of Kyūshū, was divided up into around sixty provinces, and from there into districts and villages. Villagers paid taxes in kind: a combination of rice and vegetables, raw materials, labour and military service – all of which helped to fund and secure a courtly culture in Nara that was ever more firmly rooted in the Chinese imports facilitated by the Prince. People across the land were encouraged to keep a careful eye on their neighbours as a way of promoting virtuous behaviour: a cheap and effective means of surveillance.

Not everything turned out as the Prince might have liked. His hoped-for meritocracy was conspicuously absent. Family feuding remained intense, with the Soga clan overthrown in the mid-600s and many more violent comings and goings thereafter. When career-minded young men went to study the Confucian classics at Nara's State Academy (Daigaku-ryō), they did so knowing that districts and villages were controlled largely by influential local families, while provincial governorships were handed out to major clan allies – the country's emerging aristocracy. Talented individuals of lowly stock might work their way up temple hierarchies as Buddhist monks or nuns, but otherwise birth trumped graft every time.

The impact upon the imperial institution of this heavy focus on family would be profound over the centuries to come. The Yamato sovereigns had achieved something remarkable in remaking themselves as divine emperors, establishing in the sixth and seventh centuries an imperial line that is still going strong in the twenty-first. But the feeling in the realm never went away that they were really just one elite family amongst others. When their earthly fortunes faltered, other families would be quick to muscle in.

For now, however, the emperors enjoyed considerable authority, advertising their divine descent ever more forcefully. Imperial edicts were not personal missives, they were drafted and promulgated by the Great Council of State. But from the reign of Emperor Tenmu (673–86) onwards they opened with the words: 'Hear ye the edict of an emperor who is a manifest *kami*'. Emperors also boasted their own armed forces. Clan chiefs had been successfully turned into imperial military commanders, with each province required to raise

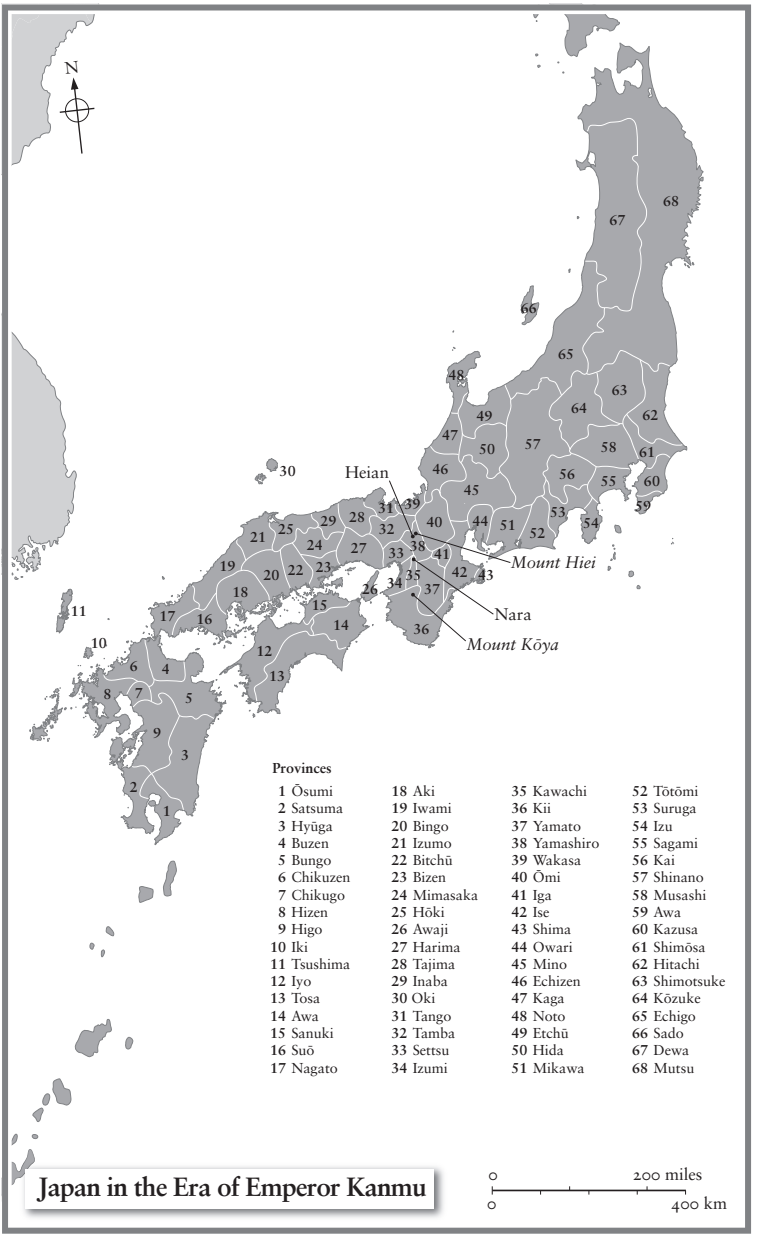
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and maintain a unit of at least 1,000 men and the realm's roads shored up to accommodate swift and easy troop movements.

The *Chronicles of Japan*, completed at the beginning of this golden era of Sinicized, centralized imperial governance, made clear in its treatment of Prince Shōtoku's passing the immense debt owed by the new state to the great diplomatic and integrating feats that he had come to represent:

> Spring, 2nd month, 5th day [621]
>
> In the middle of the night the Imperial Prince died in the Palace of Ikaruga. At this time all the Princes . . . as well as the people of the Empire [mourned him]. The old, as if they had lost a dear child, had no taste for salt and vinegar in their mouths. The young, as if they had lost a beloved parent, filled the ways with the sound of their lamenting. The farmer ceased from his plough, and the pounding woman laid down her pestle.
>
> They all said: 'The sun and moon have lost their brightness; Heaven and Earth have crumbled to ruin: henceforward, in whom shall we put our trust?'

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Japan in the Era of Emperor Kanmu

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3

Emperor Kanmu

(桓武天皇)

737–806

Boundary Pusher

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Portrait of Emperor Kanmu (painted *c.* sixteenth century), held in Enryaku-ji Temple, Shiga Prefecture, Japan.

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