

Nagy Éva: Managing Ancient Japan

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I. Beyond chronology

About 2 billion years ago, Japan was not yet an island, but only part of the Pangea, the ancient plate. The latest researches show that about 200 million years ago, it separated from the North-American tectonic plate and was adrift towards the Eurasian plate. It crashed with the Eurasian plate and uprooted a part thereof. The Japanese island emerged as a result of such tectonic movements. In the ice age, Japan was from time to time separated and then again linked together with the continent. It can be established with relative high certainty that about 30,000 years ago, the Japanese island was linked together with Sakhalin and the eastern part of the Eurasian plate in the north and with Korea in the south. At around 18,000 years ago, the ice melt and Japan became an island.

Researchers do not have exact data as to when the first human beings appeared in the Japanese island. Most of them assume that the first human beings appeared about 300,000 years ago when Asians came to the island through the iced spits. However, it can be reasonable assumed that the last ice age about 18,000 years ago killed all the humans living on the island.

II. Chronology

Japanese history starts from here, since the most scholars start the chronology at about 10,000 BC.

The first era in the Japanese history is the so-called 'Jomon era', which lasts until about 400-300 BC. It is followed by the Yayoi era, which is dated from around 400 BC to around 250AC. With the establishment of a strong hegemonic state, Yamato at around 250-300, the Yamato era started and lasted until about 250-710. The era was followed by the Nara (710-794), Heian (794-1185), early- and late Kamakura (1185-1333), Muromachi (1333-1600) and Edo period (1600-1867). Then, the Meiji era started from 1867 and lasted until 1890. The Meiji era was followed by the era of the imperialism, which includes late Meiji, Taishou and early Showa.

We have only short capacities in terms of time and space, therefore, I would like to talk about the administration of the early Japan, namely about administering and managing Japan in the Jomon, Yayoi and Yamato eras.

III. The Jomon era

Jomon' people were primitive people that lived mainly from fishing, hunting and collecting fruits. According to the scholars, these people are the ancestors of today's Japanese people. Since the string-sampled pottery characterizes this era, the era is named after this string-sampled pottery, the so-called Jomon. We can not talk about stratified society and leadership here, since the first sprouts of administration can be dated for a later period.

IV. The Yayoi era

The Yayoi era was named after a district in Tokyo, where archaeologists found in 1884 Yayoi-style pottery. Such pottery was different from the Jomon pottery, because it was not anymore decorated with a string, but engraved samples. Such pottery was prepared by craftsmen.

Another feature of the era was the appearance of rice cultivation. There were some archaeological find found showing that rice cultivation appeared much earlier, about 2000 years ago, however, since rice cultivation became general in the Yayoi era, moreover, since both dry

and wet agriculture appeared, we can date its appearance to this era. The agriculture was well-developed considering the ancient circumstances, which is mainly owed to the fact that the island took over techniques from the continent. At the same time of the appearance of the developed agriculture, iron (vas) was imported from the continent which made it possible to prepare tools for the agriculture. Due to the developed agricultural methods and the appearance of the iron, the population grew gradually. This led to the stratification of the society and the emergence of the local powers. The leading groups strengthened their positions in northern Kyushu as well as in the middle of the country. They had special rights, such as levying taxes, leading others. Their obligations included, amongst others, managing the trade, maintaining external relationships, managing fiscal affairs of the state and were the leaders of the population. They were buried separately from the common people. Their graves were called *funkyubo* and were quite far from the place they lived and the graves were very high. This is the main characteristics of the next era, namely the Yamato or Kofun era. The first sprouts of administration can be seen here, since stratification of the society already began in this era and the society consisted of more smaller or larger groups, each with their own leaders and administrative systems.

V. The Yamato or Kofun era

Development of the agriculture and animal husbandry led to a stratified society. Several smaller groups gained power and fought with each other for the power. These groups had several weapons in their hands: they were entitled to levy taxes, organizing trade, leading agricultural work, etc.

The most important political and social developments of the era are known from contemporary Chinese and Japanese chronicles. According to these, the Japanese island was made of more than hundreds of smaller groups. These groups were led by “kings” (*okimi* in Japanese) and continuously were having conflicts with China and the neighbouring countries. The chronicles mention one smaller country out of the hundred: this is the country of *Wa*. Scholars do not agree as to where in the Japanese island this small country was located. Some scholars assume that it was located in northern Kyushu, some insist that it was located in the Kinai basin. The chronicles explain that leaders of *Wa* had several conflicts with the immigrants from the continent and the power of the leaders became weaker and weaker. Under these circumstances, the peoples were not satisfied with their leader and therefore, chose a woman, *Himiko* to the throne. Pursuant to the chronicles, *Himiko* had heroic power and therefore, all her successors to the throne were credited with extraordinary power. The whole emperor dynasty is deemed to stem from the Yamato dynasty. The Yamato government under *Himiko*’s governance gradually expanded its power to other areas of the island, including the Yamato basin, *Naniwa* (today: *Osaka*), *Kawachi* area and the western parts of the island. Expansion of power is quite easy to follow, because the Yamato state was characterized by having buried governors and other leaders into special graves, so called *kofun*s.

In the middle of the 5th century, emperor *Yuuryaku* intervened into the war among several Korean states. Although he intervened on the wrong side and lost the war, many Koreans fled into the island. These Koreans brought advanced techniques to the common people and served as work force for the enhanced demands of the island’s agriculture and animal husbandry. Such circumstances served as a good basis for managing and administering the small state, Yamato. The main pillars of the administration were the so-called ‘administering stems’, which had special rights, such as right to levy taxes, lead and control common people. They were provided with property, which served as basis of their power. The administering stems were called *uji*, and leaders of these stems were called *uji-no-kami*. The *uji-no-kami*’s responsibilities included all range of tasks, e.g. to lead the *uji*, to control production, managing external relations with other *kamis*. The *Omoto* and *Mononobe* *ujis* were in charge of military tasks, the *Haji* and

Kagamitsukiri uji for the handicraft. For religious ceremonies, the Nakatomi and Inbe uji was responsible. Further, the uji-no-kami had the judicial power and he was in charge of leading the religious ceremonies. The most powerful uji-no-kami was in charge of administration. In return for their services and loyalty, uji-no-kami were empowered with special rights, they were provided with servants (kakibe), farmers (tabe), craftsmen (tomobe) (collectively: bemin), rank and the inheritable 'kabane' title. Those having the highest kabane ranks were the most important leaders of the Yamato state. The most important kabanes included: the omi-kabane, the rank for the governors of the local and regional politics, the muraji-kabane, which was provided for the uji-no-kami in charge for the most important internal matters, the miyatsuko-kabane, which was the rank for the less important internal matters and the atai-kabane, which controlled the uji-no-kami in the regions. The omi-kabane and the muraji kabane represented the most influence and power. Later, this rank was further diversified ensuring more power for the so-called oomi/great-omi and omuraji/great-muraji kabane. This system of contemporary administration was called uji-kabane system or shi-sei system and from the point of view of the production, bemin system.

The power of the ujis grew gradually and Yuuryaku, in order to keep its strong position as an emperor, re-qualified several lands as emperor's land, so-called miyake. However, despite of his efforts, Yuuryaku did not manage to keep his strong position. After his death, the ujis put their own candidate, Keitai to the throne. Keitai and his successors were trying to strengthen their positions; however the administrative system was so strong that they did not succeed. The Soga uji was in charge of the fiscal matters of the state and his successors managed to stabilize the clan's position. Prince Shotoku enacted a constitution, which consisted of 17 Articles and contained the most important administrative rules of the centralized Yamato state. During the Soga's, the Yamato state went through great changes and development. The state sent ministers to China to learn about the most important developments of the continent. Also, Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to the state during the Soga's.

In 645, all members of the Soga clan were killed and Tenji became the emperor. He introduced radical reforms, but in fact, most of these reforms already started during the Soga's. These changed are called 'Taika' and refer to a bunch of reforms copied and introduced from the developed China. The state became totally centralized; everything was directly controlled from the emperor's court. The most important reform was the land-reform. The emperor took back the lands and bemin from the ujis and ordered it under the direct control of the emperor. The system of inheriting lands was abolished, so if someone died, the land was automatically transferred back to the state. Further, taxes were levied for anything that bemin produced and the so-called work-tax was introduced, the purpose of which was the establishment of a strong army and building of state-owned buildings. The kabane system was abolished and the emperor established ministries for each type of tasks: for religious tasks, for civil matters, for justice, for managing the treasury and the fiscal matters of the state, for military matters. The main minister was assisted by several ministers and they together formed the Central State Council and the Religious Authority. The centralization did not go smoothly: the ujis did everything to hinder the establishment of a strong, centralized and bureaucratic state and to maintain their positions.

The ritsu-ryo system

At the end of the 7th century, laws were adopted from China. These laws were collected in the so-called Ritsu-ryo Code, and were a collection of social, fiscal and legal rules. By taking over these rules from China, the legal basis for the administrative state was established. The codification started as early as 668, and the Chinese sample was codified several times until the beginning of the 8th century, when there was a comprehensive codification. The most famous ritsu-ryo code was the ritsu-ryo code codified in the Taiho era. The criminal rules were more or less moral rules and the administrative and civil rules regulated the central administration and

the emperor's court. The second famous codification of the ritsu-ryo code entered into effect in 718, in the Yoro era. The rules set out in it had strong moral character, Confucian principles, and their main purpose was to endeavour people for acting good and punish them for their wrong behaviour. The Code consisted of two parts: ritsu was the collection of the penal rules and ryo of the civil and administrative rules. The majority of the rules were criminal rules. The criminal rules were a copy of the contemporary Chinese code of the T'ang dynasty, however the administrative and civil code rules – which consisted only a smaller part of the ritsuryo – were formed to be in accordance with the contemporary Japanese administrative and social system. Beside the rules of the Code, special rules called shiki and kyaku were applicable as well.

The ritsu-ryo changed the system of ascending the throne. Before 770, women were allowed to the throne and in fact, several empresses reigned before 770. However, thereafter, only men were allowed to the throne and therefore, throne was inherited by sons, brothers and uncles.

Since the education of the common people was the responsibility of the 'civil servants, the rules focused on the civil servants. So-called daigaku-s were established to teach common people (today: universities are called daigaku). Within the daigakus, so-called myo-bo-do-s were established, which correspond to today's law faculties. Teaching in this era was a great priority and learning about the ritsu-ryo and the interpretation thereof was considered as a very prestigious education. In this era, commentaries and explanations were prepared to the better and more integrated interpretation of the ritsu-ryo rules.

The ritsu ryo system could not be fully adapted to the Japanese social and cultural circumstances. Therefore, application was very difficult. Sometimes, even more rules and codes existed parallelly, so it was not an easy task to decide on the merit. In order to solve this problem, several cases were decided on the basis of special circumstances and not on the basis of the rules of the Code. On the other hand, some of these rules survived even the Meiji restoration.

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