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THE BIRTH OF JAPANESE HISTORIOGRAPHY

John R. Bentley

The Birth of Japanese Historiography

As the first book in English on the origins of Japanese historiography, using both archaeological and textual data, this book examines the connection between ancient Japan and the Korean kingdom of Paekche and how tutors from the kingdom of Paekche helped to lay the foundation for a literate culture in Japan.

Illustrating how tutors from the kingdom of Paekche taught Chinese writing to the Japanese court through the prism of this highly civilized culture, the book goes on to argue that Paekche tutors guided the early Japanese court through writing, recording family history, and ultimately an early history of the ruling family. As the Japanese began to create their own history, they relied on Paekche histories as a model. Triangulating textual data from *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *Sendai kuji hongi*, the author here demonstrates that various aspects of early king genealogies and later events were manipulated. Offering new theories about the Japanese ruling family, it is posited that Emperor Jitō had her committee put Jingū in power, and Suiko on the throne in place of original male rulers to enhance images of strong, female rulers, as she envisioned herself.

The Birth of Japanese Historiography will be a valuable resource for students and scholars of Japanese history, historiography, and linguistics.

John R. Bentley is a professor of Japanese at Northern Illinois University. He is the author of *ABC Dictionary of Ancient Japanese Phonograms*, *An Anthology of Kokugaku Scholars*, and *The Authenticity of Sendai Kuji Hongi*.

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Abbreviations

EMC	Early Middle Chinese
L	low tone/pitch accent
LH	low-high tone/pitch accent
LHC	Later Han Chinese
LMC	Late Middle Chinese
NA	not available
OC	Old Chinese
OJ	Old Japanese
PART	particle
QD	queen dowager

Illustrations

Figures

Tables

Conventions

This monograph is an attempt to merge linguistics with history to answer questions about the origins of Japanese historiography. This exercise necessitates an analysis of primary texts from China, the three kingdoms of the Korean peninsula, and Japan. I have represented the original text in traditional Chinese characters. When representing or reconstructing phonograms in Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, I have relied on the innovative Chinese reconstructions of Baxter and Sagart (2014) for Old Chinese, Schuessler (2007) for Later Han Chinese, and Pulleyblank (1991) for Early Middle Chinese. In quotations of the original Chinese, a square (□) represents a character that is illegible. In the English representation, illegible characters are written with a capital X. All translations are my own, unless specified otherwise. I have included the original text so that the reader can check any word or term.

I have represented Old Japanese in a modified Hepburn system (for those conventions, see Bentley 2013:10–11). When glosses of Japanese words come from the Heian era or later, I have elected to write /p/ as /f/. Middle Korean words are written according to Yale Romanization, but well-known place names are written in McCune-Reischauer. The names of deities in the Japanese mythologies are written in standard Hepburn Japanese. I transcribe phonograms in lowercase letters, but semantograms (*kungana*) appear in capital letters. Thus, 意美 *omi* but 臣 *OMI*. There have been times when the pitch accent of (Old) Japanese is relevant to a discussion and is noted. H represents "high," while L is "low." Thus, HLH is the pitch accent for a trisyllabic word: "high-low-high."

When talking about early kings, I have used the names as found in *Nihon shoki* for Paekche kings, with the modern names given in parentheses. I have used the original name for quasi-historical kings, and Sinified posthumously awarded the names of Japanese "emperors," i.e., Jinmu, Jitō, etc., for legendary and historical names. I have done this because both names tend to be quite long in Japanese, while the names from Ōjin (Homuda) to Keitai (Wohodo) are short.

When referring to Japan or the Korean peninsula as a geographical location, I have used the modern labels, but when referring to specific polities, I have called Japan "Wa" when dealing with pre-fifth century and Yamato after that period. I have given lesser-known peninsular place names in both the Japanese rendition and Korean. Korean Romanization has followed the McCune-Reischauer system.

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Introduction

The term "historiography" originally meant the writing of history and as such signifies what we term "historian" today. Modern definitions of historiography have evolved from earlier economic or political analyses into more "human" realms such as social and cultural history. Breisach (2008:3) notes that the task of the historian is to "trace the ways in which people in Western culture have reflected on the past and what these reflections have told them about human life as it passes continuously from past to present to future." However, as far as early Japanese historiography is concerned, there clearly was more at work than simple reflection on a single past or a stream of time from the past to their present. It is apparent that early Japanese viewed their history through the fractured prism of "family history." Evidence also strongly suggests that later a plurality of parallel yet competing *pasts* were subjected to reflection, review, and then, likely through coercion, revision. It is illuminating to reexamine the actual process of *writing history* in ancient Japan, as an elucidation of the process also sheds light on what the early Japanese deemed important, significant enough to manipulate and conflate.

One of the distinct differences of the present monograph compared to almost any other that has been written on Japanese historiography is the focus on the mechanics of writing and the inclusion of evidence gleaned from historical and philological linguistics. This adds an important window through which historians can get a better view of the early process of historiography in Japan.

Historical linguistics attempts to recover earlier remnants of a language, a language that underpins a civilization. Culture, in its many forms, written, performed, or sung, is transmitted through language. Understanding the language of earlier periods of Japanese has the power to unlock a deeper perception of the culture. Linguistics also makes it possible for scholars to elucidate critical elements found in the historiographical process. As a variety of written documents exist in Japan, linguistics married to philology is potentially a valuable tool, one that is seldom used across fields in Asia.

For example, in ancient Japan, we encounter the concept of *kotodama*, "the spiritual power in words," as early as *Man'yōshū*, a poetic anthology whose inception may be dated to around 720–730 CE. It is possible that this concept of *kotodama* evolved from the earlier belief in the power inherent in curses and spells. This power is evident in "spell songs" (*waza uta*) strategically placed in

the final third of *Nihon shoki* (720 CE), where certain types of songs portended an evil or fortuitous event. Thus, the choice of words in specific situations was believed to be potent or prophetic. It is not difficult to connect this evidence to the cultural proclivity for the use of elongated, auspicious words (as epithets) inserted in the names of people or places in ancient Japan. Auspicious words used to describe place names, such as Yamato (Japan) being called Toyo Ashihara Chiiho Aki no Mizuho "abundant-reed-plain-1500 gem-like ears of rice in the autumn (harvest)," had the power, people believed, to not only praise the prosperity of the land but also encourage the continuation of that prosperity. This belief in the power of certain words was later grafted into writing, allowing that power to survive longer than a single utterance.

Wang Haicheng (2014:21–52) makes a compelling case that writing was used in many early civilizations not only for administration but also for legitimizing the rulers of the state. In its most fundamental form, this was accomplished by preserving "king lists," outlining a lineage of rulers that created "the state as an imagined political community" (2014:301) projected back in time. These royal names could then be associated by the community with existing physical artifacts such as temples, pyramids, or keyhole-shaped tumuli. Thus, we can view historical writing as a rather incestuous endeavor, recording history as well as generating the vehicle to preserve itself.

Typically, Japanese academia has been less interested in historiography as a field, being more focused on the intersecting realms of the origins and development of Japanese culture, mythology, historical records, and the nation/state. Thus, from a Western perspective, research into the birth of historiography in Japan is a fertile field in which many Japanese scholars have plowed sections, but there has been little comprehensive work. Little has been written on this broader topic in the English language, aside from studies focused on the two earliest works, *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*.[1] This statement is not intended to be critical or negative, as starting with these two works is quite natural. Japanese history *seems* to begin with these two titles, but scholarly work here simply scratches the surface of a richer story to be told about how historiography came about in Japan.

According to its preface, *Kojiki* (古事記 "a record of ancient events") was presented to Empress Genmei (r. 707–715) on the 28th day of the first month of 712. Ō no Yasumaro (d. 723), the author of the preface, notes that the empress commanded him to abridge and record the work of what I call "the Hieda no Are project" on the 18th day of the ninth month of 711. Thus, according to his own record, Yasumaro completed his task in roughly four months. This short span of time, compared to the nearly four decades required to complete *Nihon shoki*, suggests that much of the work of compilation was already completed, and Yasumaro's role may have consisted of little more than organizational and scribal work. In other words, Yasumaro simply edited an already completed manuscript.

According to a terse announcement preserved in *Shoku Nihongi* (続日本紀 "Chronicles of Japan, continued"), *Nihon shoki* was presented to the throne by Prince Toneri (676–735), the fifth son of the influential ruler known as Tenmu (r. 672–686), sometime on or before the fifth month of 720. Lacking a preface

or document of presentation, the circumstances surrounding its compilation are much murkier. This lack of clarity in the records has long intrigued people in both Japan and the West. Why does the first official record, containing the name of the state (*nihon*), appear without fanfare or any account about the process, and yet the smaller, more insular record of *Kojiki*, which makes no appearance in the state histories, survives with an ostentatious preface? One is forced to conclude that the historiographical process that gave birth to both *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* was much more complex and turbulent than we currently appreciate.

This veil over these events naturally leads to curiosity. The birth of their own historical records has intrigued the Japanese as far back as records exist. The Japanese court sponsored a number of lectures regarding the text of *Nihon shoki* during the Nara and early Heian eras. Quotes from the minutes of these lectures were compiled into a text called *Shaku Nihongi* (ca. 1293).[2] These lectures took the format of questions and answers between a learned individual, called "the scholar," and members of the audience who were generally courtiers. The following series of questions and answers is illustrative:

QUESTION: What documents were available and formed the basis for the compilation [*Nihon shoki*]?

ANSWER: The scholar explains that some people believe *Kojiki* was the basic work; others state that it was *Sendai kuji hongi*. If the compilers [of *Nihon shoki*] used *Kojiki* as the basic material for this work, then we must address the many problematic differences existing between the two texts [making that theory untenable]. *Kojiki* simply establishes the meaning of words and sets up the origin of things, without giving any thought to literary beauty. Thus, during the compilation of this work, the compilers would have been obliged to modify many passages.

(Onoda 1986:7)

Within a century or so, the educated courtiers no longer had access to the institutional memory about the fundamental source material for *Nihon shoki*. Without knowing what the source material was, knowledge regarding the origins of this highly influential historical work was doomed to slip into the fog of time. People were rightly intrigued by *Nihon shoki*, with its many versions of a story, while *Kojiki* is a linear narration. Regarding the many variant quotes (J. *issho*, 一書) in the first two books of *Nihon shoki*, the following exchange appears in *Shaku Nihongi*:

QUESTION: The comments in this record are not commentary from historical works. There are many quotes from variant works (一書) or other traditions (或説). What are these?

ANSWER: Previous scholars have denied what some have said about these comments lacking an explanatory character. Regardless, there are many comments, inserted with the words "another work says," "another theory is," "a tradition says," or "it is also said that…." The reason [for these comments]

> is because there were families in the past who crafted records in the ancient language as they enjoyed [learning about] events from the ancient period, and [that resulted in] quite a number of these works. When this record (*Nihon shoki*) was compiled, the compilers did not want to insert these other traditions into the text, but they found they could not discard them. Thus, they added these quotes to the text.
>
> (Onoda 1986:11)

Umezawa Isezō (1976:457) finds it difficult to accept this theory about families crafting earlier works, but he notes that this quote at least preserves a tradition underscoring the basis for Tenmu's claim preserved in *Kojiki*'s preface that records in possession of various families had been corrupted by the inclusion of facts the throne deemed untrue.

As events surrounding the historiographical project that resulted in *Nihon shoki* are shrouded in mystery, the only clue scholars have for the impetus of the project that resulted in either *Kojiki* or *Nihon shoki* is found in Yasumaro's preface and the text of *Nihon shoki*. A multitude of scholars have mined the preface of *Kojiki* looking for clues, but David Lurie (2001:270) cautions that Yasumaro's preface sets up a "fictional construct," suggesting that the information within the preface must be read and used with extreme care—a shot across the bow of readers and scholars who tend to believe a variety of *facts* provided by Yasumaro. The key here is to keep in mind that we *may* figuratively be reading *Alice in Wonderland* and not *Finnegans Wake*.

What makes research into the origins of Japanese historiography somewhat difficult is the two-dimensional nature of these surviving data. Historians have worked mainly with these two semi-detailed sources (*Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*), but while some have moved forward, there has been a constant drumbeat by others trying to demonstrate that X or Y in either record is not reliable and should be downplayed or ignored. The thickening scholarly skepticism has, at times, had the unintended consequence of casting doubt on the overall value of both works. Wakai (2006:289–90) sounds a warning, noting that many scholars place differing degrees of value on *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, depending on their skepticism of the worth of these two works. He sees these scholars putting distance between their own research and these two works but believes that both works should not be discarded as completely unworthy of historical inquiry.

Kobayashi (2006:324) takes a step further, cautioning us, "We cannot say that traditions (found in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*) are historical facts, but this author has confidence in the power of the traditions in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*." In other words, a balanced approach to these works has more to offer that is positive than negative.

My research proposes to resolve this difficulty by triangulating these data with the addition of a third text, *Sendai kuji hongi* (hereafter *Kujiki*). Condemned as a forgery in the Edo Period, and then later feebly resuscitated as "derivative," much of the supposed scholarly work on the authenticity of *Kujiki* has been cursory, haphazard, and unscientific. In a nutshell, scholars have tended to get

hung up on the problem of seeing *Kujiki* as a Heian era creation, but if Kanda (1992) and Bentley (2006:44–48, 67–70) are correct, then Imibe Hironari relied on an untitled manuscript of *Kujiki* in the process of compiling *Kogo shūi* (807), and not the other way around. This should cause us to reexamine the dating of *Kujiki*.

While I have argued that *Kujiki* is still derivative in nature, I posit that the period of inception for this important text is contemporaneous with the period of compilation of both *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, the work done under the authority of Minister of the Left Isonokami Maro (640–717). The work was completed as a draft, and with the death of Maro, this draft was shelved, not to see the light of day until the early Heian era (Bentley 2006:117–19). Access to these three works grants a better glimpse not only into the past but also into the process of historiography, especially since there are several unique sections in *Kujiki* that provide important additional information.

The search for the origins of historiography in early Japan is entangled in several different but related issues: an oral tradition versus a written one, a native tradition versus one decked out in Chinese garb, and the fractured feature of primitive chronology versus a manipulated chronology.[3] One purpose of this monograph is to untangle these issues to understand the earlier elements of historiography and examine how foreign literate cultures (primarily from Paekche and China) were adapted into the Japanese historiographical process and then reengineered later for political and social purposes, creating the early histories that resulted in the histories that have survived until today.

The process for this search is understandably somewhat tenuous, as our main evidence is textual. Texts say whatever the author wants, but the hope is that by triangulating our data, we increase the possibility of screening out layers of manipulative noise. Here Kobayashi (2006:85) has a word of wisdom for us because many scholars argue for the "creation" or "fabrication" of material in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* with a tendency to shut the door to pathways within traditions that may lead to answers to a variety of questions. I interpret this warning not to mean that we trust everything in these records, but rather that we should spend adequate time using internal evidence to tease out what the ancient historiographers believed, regardless of whether it was historical fact or not. Our modern low tolerance for things not historical should not be allowed to become an unyielding standard upon which we judge the ancient historians to whom the idea of "truth" or "fact" was likely different from our own.

My method is to use comparative textual analysis to find vestiges of data, mainly genealogical, to reconstruct the earlier state of histories. By trying to uncover an earlier template, I will demonstrate how early Japanese historiography was deeply indebted to the philosophy, skill, and technology of the kingdom of Paekche. Many have suggested and even argued for such a link, but the inclination continues to be that scholars see China as the great teacher and Japan as the student. This monograph argues that such a conclusion is not true until at least the beginning of the seventh century. This work is constructed in the following chapters.

Chapter 1, "The medium: the mechanics of writing history," starts from the very beginning, illustrating how the *techne* of writing came to Yamato. Evidence is provided showing clearly that the kingdoms of Koguryŏ and Paekche accepted the Chinese writing system *in toto*, and then manipulated it to fit characteristics of their own language. That early Japan did the same is neither coincidence nor accident. Peninsular tutors taught and guided Yamato students in this process. With Chinese writing came Chinese philosophy, politics, and record keeping. This discussion is set in a broader geopolitical framework, as none of these kingdoms acted in a vacuum.

Chapter 2, "Words and their meanings," surveys the introduction of writing to the Yamato elite. With this cultural tool came extended Chinese cultural and political philosophies, but these entered Yamato through a Paekche filter. Cultural power, through the written word and writing technology, came into Yamato in a two-pronged wave: one through shared contact by the Wa on the peninsula and the other through direct importation from Paekche. This chapter introduces Paekche and Silla records that outline the mythological beginning of their histories, and it is natural to segue into Japanese mythology, as all the early Japanese records begin with the mythological foundations of the ruling family. Finally, cultural issues are addressed regarding the importation of these cultural tools.

Chapter 3, "Mythical beginnings and the beginning of mythology," surveys Japanese mythology as contained in *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *Kujiki*, compared with the foundation stories in Okinawa. This chapter attempts to peel back the layers of political thinking to uncover an "ur-mythology" that originally formed the core of the mythology of the powerful families in Izumo and Yamato.

Chapter 4, "From kings to heavenly sovereigns," outlines the process from the earliest attempts at historiography, starting from "king lists" to a simple chronology of rulers and then eventually to the creation of an unbroken succession of rulers that extended back in time beyond the institutional memory of the court. The main point is that serious historiography began in the reign of Yūryaku (Wake Take) when oral traditions were set to writing. An attempt is made to further the work of historians like Mizuno (1954) to determine which rulers in the genealogy are historical and which are either fabricated or legendary. One conclusion is that competing dynasties ruled the Yamato basin during the late fifth into the sixth centuries. This chapter also concludes that the manipulation of the age of the early kings, and the plagiaristic quoting of Chinese works in the histories, is not something the Japanese invented, but was a technique learned from their Paekche tutors.

Chapter 5, "The beginnings of writing a history," argues that the Keitai-Kinmei era saw the first actual history of the Yamato court with a genealogy of rulers going back six generations. This was the first record to connect the ruling lineage back to a mythological figure. I introduce the three Paekche histories quoted in *Nihon shoki*, as evidence of a Paekche template used by the Yamato court. The simple historiographical template is preserved in the skeleton record in the dynastic section of *Kujiki*. This chapter then introduces the thorny subject of historiography in the Suiko era. Using hints from *Nihon shoki*, it is argued that historiography

passed from a courtly function to one controlled by a few peninsular families, who retained the technology for writing. It is also during this season that the Yamato court decided a unified foundational myth was necessary. The historiographical work of this period was never finished but remained in draft form.

Chapter 6, "The Tenmu-Jitō historiographical project," outlines the beginning of what later becomes *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. While Tenmu ordered the beginning of the process, I argue in this chapter that the stamp of Jitō was what set this project apart from previous ones. Jitō wanted the realm to view her court as controlling an empire, a mirror image of a female sovereign who anciently had the peninsula under her umbrella; thus, the court elevated Jingū to the status of a military queen, much like the sun goddess thwarting her unruly brother. The dissonance between the history as portrayed in *Nihon shoki* and the description of Suiko's era in *Suishu* is resolved by concluding that the *Suishu* is the more accurate, and the *Shoki* version is heavily manipulated. In other words, Jitō wanted a female sovereign on the throne and had the history revised. Ultimately Jitō's vision was to create a mirror image of the ruling family in the High Plain of Heaven, with herself as the sun goddess.

The conclusion ties this together, arguing that greater appreciation is needed for the guidance and influence that earlier kingdoms, mainly Kara and Paekche, had in laying the cultural and technological foundation for Yamato to become literate, keep its own written records, and then begin to write its own history.

Notes

1 Exceptions include Barnes (1987, 2012) and Piggott (1997).
2 I have followed Onoda (1986:22) in seeing *Shaku Nihongi* as being completed between 1286 and 1301; he also adheres to the work by Akamatsu Toshihide, who posits a date around 1293 to be the most appropriate.
3 This refers to oral traditions with a vague, fluid chronology being later mated to a "constructed" narrative complete with a detailed chronology.

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All works are published in Tokyo, unless otherwise noted.

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1 The medium

The mechanics of writing history

The term "historiography" naturally implies that some historical narrative is being written on some physical material through a specific linguistic medium. This is such a basic assumption that scholars generally gloss over it or provide little more than a sentence or two. However, as Lurie (2011:4) points out, there has been such an overzealous search for the origins of phonographic writing in Japan that other dominant forms of writing have been ignored or underappreciated, resulting in a skewed understanding of how writing sprouted and then grew in Japan. It is helpful to retrace these steps to examine how a small group of literate inhabitants on the Japanese archipelago wrote a century before the era when the work on *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* began. To do that, we need to go back several centuries earlier in time.

Kobayashi (2010:20–23) has argued that with the establishment of the four Han commanderies on the Korean peninsula by Emperor Wu around 108 BCE Chinese culture began to seep systematically into the cultures of the various native polities on the peninsula. One of these key components of Chinese culture was written communication, or the ability to read and write.[1] A number of scholars have previously suggested that Wa-speaking (or para-Japonic) people inhabited both the southern part of the Korean peninsula and the archipelago at a transitional time in history (cf. Unger 2005, Vovin 2007, Bentley 2008a), based on archaeological or linguistic evidence. The most fundamental data are tantalizing tidbits from Chinese records.[2] Thus, we are not required to see immigrants from other polities as the only catalyst for burgeoning literacy in Yamato.

Kwon (2013:82–85) has argued that Han China originally set up an "outer vassal" (外臣) system with Old Chosŏn during the reign of Emperor Hui (r. 195–188 BCE), where responsibilities of defense and security were entrusted by the Han Court to Old Chosŏn. When Old Chosŏn's belligerence and insolence became too much to stomach, Emperor Wu (r. 156–87 BCE) invaded Old Chosŏn and destroyed it. Wu then established four commanderies (Chinese colonies) in the conquered territory: Zhenfan, Lintun, Xuantu, and Lelang. The precise locations of these are a matter of debate, but scholars agree that Lelang, the most important of the four commanderies, was located near modern Pyongyang. Excavations at T'osŏng-ni confirm that the Lelang administrative center was in that area (Eckert et al. 1990:14). Kim (2012:18) believes that the Zhenfan Commandery was