

# Deities of Heaven, deities of Earth, and two aspects of foreignness in Japanese origin myths

Bernhard Scheid\*

This essay addresses some narrative strategies of the earliest Japanese texts (eighth century CE), which explain the origins and history of the ruling dynasty. I argue that these texts, which combine an annalistic style borrowed from China with what we now call »mythology«, employ a sophisticated, Janus-faced concept of foreignness. In the mythological episodes situated before the eventual establishment of the political order, both people and objects of foreign, continental origin are awarded exalted status by replacing the continent with »Heaven«. This strategy primarily serves to legitimize the rule of the ancestors of the Tennō Dynasty and its court, who are styled as the descendants of »heavenly deities«. Conversely, local leaders outside this ruling elite are associated with »Earth«, which implies a vernacular and »unruly« cultural tradition and thus a lower status. Foreigners who appear after the supposed (mythical) inception of Tennō rule, however, are no longer associated with heavenly origins but with concrete and often hostile neighboring countries. In this context, foreignness, though still associated with advanced culture, is depreciated in social value. By comparing key episodes from the annals with similar stories in local gazetteers, I argue that this double standard of foreignness was a novel feature of Japanese mythology that originated from narrative strategies in the context of early state formation.

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The god Omizunu looked at the cape of white Shiragi in search of spare land, and saw that Shiragi had an overabundance of land. Thereupon he took a spade, thrust it into the land, shook it, and broke off a piece. Then he looped a rope around the land and began to pull it. Thus, he added to Izumo the portion of land called Cape Kizuki.<sup>1</sup>

This is the beginning of an origin story of Izumo, an old province in Western Japan, which has a particularly strong local tradition and had been an autonomous political entity in prehistoric Japan.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist, a creator god whose name links him to the region's Hi (or Hii)

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\* Correspondence details: Dr. Bernhard Scheid, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA); Dominikanerbastei 16, 1010 Vienna, Austria; tel.: +43-1-51581-6400; email: bernhard.scheid@oeaw.ac.at

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1 *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, translation adapted from Aoki, *Records of Wind and Earth*, 80.

2 On the prehistory of Izumo, see Piggott, *Sacral kingship*; Torrance, *Izumo*.

River, repeats his land-pulling action four times, until the country finally takes its present shape. Interestingly, the land from where Omizunu drags the new parts of his country is none other than the Korean Peninsula, situated some 300 km to the west of Izumo on the other side of the Korean Strait. Therefore, scholars have taken the story as an indication of a strong influence by the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla (Shiragi, in ancient Japanese)<sup>3</sup> on this particular region.

Another ancient province, Harima, situated between Izumo and Yamato in central Japan, has an origin myth that features a culture hero called Ame no Hiboko (Sun Halberd of Heaven) from Silla. Although we will elaborate upon his story later, it is important to emphasize that this specific legend features a cultural hero from abroad as its main protagonist.



Map 1: Korea and Japan around the early 7th century CE

Both provincial origin stories are known to us from local chronicles or »gazetteers« (Jap. *fudoki*) compiled in the eighth century. They are thus roughly contemporary with the much better-known chronicles compiled by members of the Imperial Court, the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*, 712 CE) and the *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720 CE). While this essay will primarily focus on the origin stories of these latter sources, which reflect the political ideology

3 Before the political unification of the Korean Peninsula by Silla in 668, the region was governed by three kingdoms: Goguryeo in the north, Baekje in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast.

of the ruling dynasty, beginning the essay with local histories helps demonstrate that mythical narrative traditions in eighth-century Japan by no means excluded the notion of Korea or continental culture. Rather, the local traditions of Izumo and Harima seem to be based on a desire to connect local culture with the continent and to participate in the prestige of advanced technological and civilizational progress coming from outside their regional sphere.

As we will see, origin stories in the imperial chronicles took a different stance. At least in the descriptions of the mythical »Age of the Gods«, when the ancestors of the ruling dynasty and its court descended from Heaven, countries outside the Japanese archipelago are virtually non-existent. Starting from this observation, the objective of this essay is to demonstrate that two different interpretations of foreign origins were present in the earliest Japanese texts. These different approaches can be further related to different strategies employed to legitimize rulership.

In addressing these questions, I see myself as part of a German research tradition that originated with the pioneering translations of mythological texts by Karl Florenz (1865–1939). Florenz' research was driven by his interest in comparative mythology – a field that became increasingly important in postwar Japanese Studies with the contributions of Nelly Naumann (1922–2000), Klaus Antoni, and others.<sup>4</sup> While this rather anthropological approach shaped my preunderstanding of Japanese mythology, I am also indebted to recent studies by Raji Steineck,<sup>5</sup> Robert Wittkamp,<sup>6</sup> and David Weiss.<sup>7</sup> These authors integrate and discuss a Japanese approach known as *sakuhin ron* ([literary] work analysis), which is of a more literary-historical nature and is represented by, among others, the studies of Kōnosshi Takamitsu (born 1946).<sup>8</sup> In the anglophone world, the *sakuhin* approach has also led to a reevaluation of Japanese mythology and ancient history, to which this essay is indebted.<sup>9</sup> While Kōnosshi has insisted that mytho-historical classics *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* be treated as independent works with different cosmological outlooks, my own reading has more in common with a recent approach that focuses on genealogy, represented by scholars such as Mizuguchi Mutsuko (1931–2021), Saijō Tsutomu, or, most recently, Suzuki Masanobu.<sup>10</sup> According to their findings, the classics share a common goal; namely, integrating originally disparate origin stories into one master narrative that presents the Japanese elites as belonging to one huge extended family. This endeavor can be also detected in a number of ancient family genealogies such

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4 Naumann is often dubbed »the grande dame of Japanese mythology« within the German-speaking realm. Her studies include Naumann, *Einheimische Religion Japans. Teil 1*; or Naumann, *Mythen des alten Japan*. Her student, Klaus Antoni, started from her comparative approach but also deals with the political instrumentalization of mythology and Shinto in modernity. See Antoni, *Weisse Hase*; Antoni, *Shintō*; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni. Both authors have been somewhat influenced by Japanese cultural anthropologists such as Oka Masao (1898–1982) and Ōbayashi Taryō (1929–2001).

5 Steineck, *Kritik*.

6 Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*.

7 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*.

8 Kōnosshi, *Kojiki no sekaikan*.

9 See, for instance, Ooms, *Tenmu Dynasty*; Como, *Weaving and Binding*; Lurie, *Realms of Literacy*; Duthie, *Jinshin Rebellion*; Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*.

10 Mizoguchi, *Nihon kodai shizoku*; Saijō, *Kojiki to ōke*; Suzuki, *Methodology*.

as *Awaga Daimyōjin ganki*, a fragmentary genealogy of shrine priests said to date back to the year 708. However, integrating these genealogies into a history of nation building puts the imperial mytho-histories into a category of their own when compared, for instance, to other early texts such as the aforementioned *fudoki*.

### *The Historical Context of Japanese Origin Myths*

Japanese origin myths were codified at a time when political and ethnic diversity was still a living memory on the archipelago – or was even still being experienced directly in battles with non-Japonic ethnicities in the east (starting from the regions east of modern Kyoto) and the southwest (southern Kyushu). The technologically most advanced regions in the Yamato Basin (now Nara Prefecture), which formed the coalescent core of the state,<sup>11</sup> drew advantage from a constant flux of immigrants from Korea and China, who supported the regime as experts of metallurgy, writing, and even religion (especially in the field of Buddhism). Around 700, a state had formed that called itself *Nihon* (Japan), lit. [land of the] origin of the sun. This alludes to the fact that the island empire lay to the east of China, which was acknowledged as the »central empire«. This central empire not only served as a model for Japan, but for the entire East and Central Asian regions. In this sphere, the emerging Japanese state was in many respects the last recipient of Chinese cultural innovations, which it usually imported from Korea. However, for reasons that lie beyond the scope of this article, the adoption of Chinese civilization in Japan proceeded with surprising speed and efficacy.

### *The Codification of Mytho-History*

In the late seventh century, the court put all its efforts into what Steineck calls the »legal administration of time and space«,<sup>12</sup> which eventually led to a first consistent calendar based on Chinese models (701), a permanent capital (Nara, 710),<sup>13</sup> a population register (from 690 onward), and regional administrative units (provinces) that were given a legally fixed form. These institutions were held together by a civic and a penal legal code now known as the *ritsuryō* system, which was adopted from the Tang Dynasty (617-907). Finally, the dynastic history was codified in the aforementioned chronicles, *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. The fact that these texts constitute the oldest extant examples of Japanese literature testifies to their continuous importance for the self-representation of the imperial institution.

These chronicles follow a Chinese model of »national histories« (Chin. *guoshi*) in that they use the reigns of »emperors«, no matter whether their reigns were long or short, turbulent or peaceful, as the basic unit of historical periodization. The figure of the emperor is »the organizing subject that defines [...] the geographical and temporal frames of the historical narrative and the types of information that it includes or excludes«.<sup>14</sup> The *Nihon shoki* even meticulously dates the imperial reigns according to the Chinese lunisolar calendar, which must

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11 Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*.

12 Steineck, *Kritik*, 91.

13 Some historians may identify the first capital as Fujiwara-kyō, established in 694 and constructed in line with Chinese models, which served as the imperial headquarters for only 16 years.

14 Duthie, *Jinshin Rebellion*, 299.

have involved sophisticated retrospective calculations of largely imaginary historic events for a period of more than a thousand years.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to China, however, the Japanese chronicles contain origin stories about the divine ancestors of the Imperial House that reach back to the beginning of the universe. In this sense, the chronicles can also be referred to as mytho-histories.

In tracing the ruling elite back to Heaven, Japan's mytho-genealogy explained and legitimized a hereditary status system that determined the ranks and the administrative tasks of all aristocratic families. Therefore, the imperial chronicles were comparable in authority to a code of law.<sup>16</sup> Their compilation was a huge stately project, which probably started in 681<sup>17</sup> and lasted until the completion of the *Nihon shoki* in 720.<sup>18</sup> In 712, a first version of the mytho-history was published under the title *Kojiki*.<sup>19</sup> While both texts follow essentially the same storyline, an important formal difference lies in the fact that the *Nihon shoki* provides a plethora of variant stories for each episode, especially in its fascicles on the »Age of the Gods« that we now classify as »mythology«. Indeed, the *Kojiki* may be regarded as merely another variant alongside those presented in the *Nihon shoki*. Nevertheless, the *Nihon shoki* came to be regarded as Japan's first »national history« (*kokushi*) and thus held much greater authority than its predecessor.

Serving as a kind of »constitution« for hereditary status rights, the mytho-chronicles complemented the *ritsuryō* legal code, which had been adopted from China. In a sense, they represented a conservative element within the rapid »modernization« of 8th-century Japan. At the same time, they formed a frame of reference that served as the foundation for all legal texts dealing with issues of social class. This type of law-making by narratological precedent was also extended to the provinces. In an edict of 713, the court stipulated that the governors of the sixty-plus newly established provinces<sup>20</sup> should supply information on their respective domains. While the edict emphasized provincial products and geography, governors should also »record and report the old legends transmitted by the elders«.<sup>21</sup> This resulted in the compilation of the previously mentioned local gazetteers (*fudoki*), five of which are still extant from the eighth century. The origin myth of Izumo cited above is known to us from these texts.<sup>22</sup> While the information thus gathered certainly reflected local customs and beliefs, it was not free from central influence, since the governors were not local people, but bureaucrats from the Yamato court. Nevertheless, the local gazetteers often show remarkable differences to the

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15 Steineck, *Kritik*, 227-229.

16 Scheid, *Mythology and genealogy*.

17 *Nihon shoki*, Tenmu 10 (681)/3/16; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 350.

18 Translations from this text are taken from *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, originally published in 1896.

19 Translations are usually taken from Heldt's *Kojiki* (2014), but I also refer to Antoni's *Kojiki* (2012), since the latter maintains the original names of places and deities, in accordance with common conventions.

20 In the seventh and eighth centuries, the number of Japanese provinces shifted between 58 and 69, until it was settled at 66 in 824 (*Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 4).

21 The edict is cited in the *Shoku Nihongi*, a compilation of annals completed in 797, under the entry of »Third year of Wado (713), 5th month, 2nd day« (*Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 1).

22 The *Harima fudoki* is believed to be from 715; the *Izumo fudoki* mentions its compilation in 733.

official mytho-history. Hence, they provide glimpses of the mythical worldviews outside the imperial court, which was at the same time the raw material of the official annals.

### *Social Stratification*

In the imperial chronicles, the mytho-genealogical stratification was based on the categories of »heavenly deities« and »earthly deities«. As will be demonstrated in greater detail later, we can interpret this distinction as a hierarchy between culturally dominant »outsiders« and »natives« of perceived inferior rank. This interpretation is consistent with recent theories on social stratification and ethnic conflicts during the formative period of the Japanese state. Joan Piggott has convincingly summarized archeological findings, which show a dominant coalescent core that was either of continental origin or had close contacts with continental culture bearers and benefitted from privileged access to continental technology.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, the elevation of foreign groups seems to have reached its conclusion when social stratification was fixed in relation to a ruling dynasty at the center of the nascent Japanese state. From that time onward, a significant proportion of noble families traced their ancestry to the continent, yet they were classified into a social category that ranked below the supposedly indigenous descendants of the »gods of Heaven and Earth«. This can be seen from a register of noble families, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* (*New Selection of Names and Titles*), which was compiled in 815 by a team of courtiers and members of the imperial house. According to its preface, one of the reasons for this register's compilation was the need to clarify foreign names in order to prevent the fraudulent assumption of status. During the eighth century, this had become a problem, since »common people everywhere connected themselves to branches of the nobility, and foreign guests from the Korean Peninsula called themselves the descendants of Yamato deities«. <sup>24</sup> Thus, the register lists 1,182 families in and around the capital and distinguishes them according to their purported origin.

As Nadia Kanagawa has shown, this attempt to restrict social mobility through state-sanctioned genealogical tables draws on models from the Tang dynasty. However, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* grouped the Japanese nobility into a set of three main categories that is unique to Japan: »royal lines« (*kōbetsu*), »divine lines« (*shinbetsu*), and »various foreigners« (*shoban*) of Korean or Chinese origin. The second category is again subdivided into three sets: »heavenly deities« (*tenjin*), »heavenly grandsons« (*tenson*, here referring to heavenly collateral lines of the imperial house), and »earthly deities« (*chigi*). One would expect that families related to the »earthly deities«, i.e., indigenous tribes who submitted to Yamato rule, would have constituted the vast majority. However, as Mizoguchi has pointed out, only 26 families among the total of 404 families from the *shinbetsu* faction actually related themselves to autochthon gods such as Ōkuninushi.<sup>25</sup> This indicates a substantial degree of genealogic flexibility, which, as the preface of the *Shinsen shōjiroku* frankly acknowledges, resulted in an inflation of heavenly ancestors. While some »foreign« families may also have switched to native ancestors,

23 Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*. For a study of immigration in ancient Japan, see also Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*.

24 *Shinsen shōjiroku*, preface, transl. Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*, 257-258. See also Kiley, *Surnames*, 178.

25 Mizoguchi, *Ōken shinwa*, 38-40; Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*, 104.

this group was probably more stable. Some of them had resided in Japan for centuries, while others came to Japan as refugees in the seventh and eighth centuries. Together, they constitute about one third of the families mentioned in the register.

What is relevant to our case is the fact that all social categories (whether applied accurately or not) relate themselves to the mythology of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which are referenced as major sources in *Shinsen shōjiroku*. The only exception is the group of »various foreigners«, which is not explicitly mentioned in these earlier texts. Kanagawa relates their inclusion in a specific category to a new policy concerning foreigners in the early ninth century.<sup>26</sup> I would argue, however, that the category reflects an ideological divide between strangers from Heaven and foreigners from the continent, which is already present in the chronicles, as detailed below. Nevertheless, the *Shinsen shōjiroku* demonstrates the success and the continuous authority of the imperial mythology as a canonical source of family status.

### *Mytho-Geography*

In both chronicles, the first section about the »Age of the Gods«<sup>27</sup> explains the spontaneous creation of Heaven and Earth,<sup>28</sup> followed by the »birth« of the Japanese islands via the sexual communion of a primordial couple (Izanaki and Izanami). In the next generation, the narrative turns to the High Plains of Heaven, ruled by the sun goddess, Amaterasu. We then follow her brother and antagonist Susanoo into his exile on Earth where he fathers a new dynasty of earthly rulers. His descendant, Ōkuninushi, emerges as the ruler of all earthly deities (*kuni tsu kami*). The deities in Heaven (*ama tsu kami*) regard this rule as chaotic and decide to replace Ōkuninushi with Amaterasu's grandson, Ho no Ninigi. The latter descends to Earth, but settles in a remote mountain region in Kyushu. Only Ho no Ninigi's great-grandson, posthumously named Jinmu Tennō, manages to conquer central Japan (the Yamato heartland) and becomes the inaugural »heavenly ruler« (*tennō* or *ame no sumera*). The foundation of his empire, which the *Nihon shoki* pseudohistorically dates back to a year in the Chinese calendar corresponding to 660 BCE, marks the conclusion of the Age of the Gods.

As this synopsis shows, the mytho-historical compilers took care to include a number of important regional centers in the Imperial House's foundation narrative. In particular, Izumo and Kyushu receive special attention in order to explain their integration into the early Yamato state. Conversely, references to countries beyond the Japanese islands are virtually non-existent. The empires on the continent only begin to emerge in the records of »human« rulers after Jinmu, whose accounts gradually take on a degree of historical veracity.

The inherent exclusivism of this narrative layout may appear to be the result of a »natural ethnocentrism«, if we believe the claim of the *Kojiki*'s preface that this text was the faithful transcription of stories transmitted orally since times immemorial. However, as many scholars have noted, there are reasons to doubt this claim. The compilers of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*

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26 Kanagawa, *Making the Realm*, chap. 3.

27 The expression »Age of the Gods« (*jindai* or *kami no yo*) derives from the first two chapters or fascicles of the *Nihon Shoki*, which correspond to the first fascicle of the *Kojiki*.

28 In the *Kojiki*, cosmogonic explanations based on Chinese nature philosophy are part of the preface; in the *Nihon Shoki*, they are part of the main text.

possessed not only familiarity with the Chinese writing system – the sole medium for recording native texts – but also with Chinese literature, history, and philosophy. They introduced Chinese concepts such as Yin and Yang into notions of time and space, as if Chinese nature philosophy had always been part of Japanese traditions. In fact, even the conceptional split between deities of Heaven (associated with Yang) and deities of Earth (associated with Yin) seems to be derived from Chinese cosmology. Japanese chroniclers thus enriched local storytelling traditions with abstract concepts of foreign origin in order to lend them authority and credibility. This raises the question of why they did not also refer to places and legends in China or Korea. In order to answer this question, a closer examination of ethnic diversity as mirrored in some mythological key episodes is necessary.

### *Foreigners in the Mytho-History*

#### *Susanoo and the Aboriginal Deities*

The imperial chronicles do not explain in detail how the first humans came into existence, but occasionally use the expression »human grass« (*hito kusa*).<sup>29</sup> This term seems to refer to an aboriginal population who came into existence on Earth when the original couple created the first islands. The plant-like humans only begin to assume a distinct role in the narrative when Susanoo descends from Heaven and liberates them from a giant serpent/dragon with a particular appetite for young girls. A first ruling dynasty takes shape after Susanoo kills this monster and is granted the girl he saved as wife. The descendants of Susanoo, as well as supporting figures such as a mountain deity (who must have existed prior to his appearance), are designated as »deities of Earth«. This classification distinguishes them from the »deities of Heaven« while also identifying them as a distinct ruling class on Earth.

The story of Susanoo incorporates a number of motifs known from mythical complexes all around the world (including the dragon-slaying motif).<sup>30</sup> This has led to a longstanding debate within the field of comparative mythology concerning Susanoo's fundamental mythological nature. He has been variously interpreted as a »storm god«, a »moon god«, or simply a classical »trickster«.<sup>31</sup> The problem with these explanations is that they treat Susanoo as an archetypical figure and a key protagonist in mythological storytelling on the archipelago since time immemorial. Yet, there are reasons to doubt the archaic nature of the Susanoo episodes. Since Susanoo's major deed on Earth – the slaying of the serpent – is consistently situated at the »upper reaches of the river Hi in Izumo«, we would assume that this story is derived from Izumo and should be also present in the local mythology of this region. However, it is absent in the *Izumo fudoki*. This text only mentions Susanoo in the context of a township in Izumo

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29 In the *Kojiki*, this expression first appears in the narrative about the original couple, when Izanami, the future ruler of the realm of the dead, vows to »strangle to death one thousand of your land's green-grass mortals each and every day« (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 16).

30 On the dragon slaying motif in comparative mythology, see, for instance, Witzel, *Origins*, 148-154.

31 On the different aspects and recent interpretations of Susanoo, see Weiss, *Japanese trickster*. For a classic comparative interpretation of Susanoo, see Naumann, Sakahagi.

known as Susa<sup>32</sup> and identifies several lesser local deities as his offspring. Thus, Susanoo, literally »the man from Susa«, is depicted as a supporting character in the *Izumo fudoki*, devoid of a clearly delineated narrative function.<sup>33</sup>

I suspect, therefore, that Susanoo as he appears in the imperial chronicles is actually a very novel narrative figure, probably invented or at least reassembled by the compilers in the late seventh or early eighth century. His ambivalent nature corresponds to the location of his actions: While in Heaven, he is given the role of a villain who damages the sun goddess's palace, drives her into the famous Heavenly Grotto, and is therefore banished from her realm. In these episodes, he serves as a wicked foil to emphasize the positive qualities of the sun goddess, as David Weiss has pointed out.<sup>34</sup> As soon as Susanoo appears on Earth, on the other hand, he is associated with positive stories like the slaying of a dragon. Subsequently, he becomes the progenitor of several earthly deities, introducing a first dynastic order and thus acting as a vanguard of the celestial regime. I regard these different roles as a result of the fact that the compilers used Susanoo for a double purpose: On the one hand, as the heroic ancestor of various local rulers who may have claimed celestial origins themselves; on the other hand, as the villain whose evil nature justified the subordination of his descendants to an even higher »heavenly ruler«. This is not to deny the existence of previous trickster figures in Japanese mythology, which may be recognizable in the figure of Susanoo, as Weiss<sup>35</sup> argues. However, I suggest that the ambivalence of the trickster gained a new function in the case of Susanoo, namely to define and to rank the category of »earthly deities« in a privileged yet ultimately subordinate position.

#### *Korea-Related Subtexts*

As noted above, the mythological sections of the Japanese chronicles are largely confined to the Japanese islands. Nevertheless, hints at the existence of Korea surface, occasionally even in these initial parts of the imperial mytho-history. As recently pointed out by Weiss, these hints are most evident in Susanoo's exile story, which is set in Izumo. One variant story in the *Nihon shoki* identifies the sword with which Susanoo slays the monster as the »serpent blade from Kara« (Orochi no Kara-sai no Tsurugi).<sup>36</sup> Kara is the ancient Japanese name given to the Korean Peninsula, but can also refer to the continent as a whole – including China. Here, the mention of Kara suggests that Susanoo uses an excellent sword made of Korean ironware,

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32 *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 140. In the imperial chronicles, Susanoo chooses a place in Izumo called Suga (»refreshed«) as his headquarters (*Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 44; *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 27; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 53). Today, a Suga Shrine and a Susa Shrine exist in the Izumo region, both of which are traced back to Susanoo.

33 In the *Bingo fudoki*, a gazetteer from a western province only known from later fragments, Susanoo is identified as a god of epidemics (Florenz, *Japanische Mythologie*, 302-303). While this role is hardly recognizable from the classical chronicles, it is consistent with the idea of this deity in the lore of many Shinto shrines and may be closer to his original character.

34 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, chap. 2.

35 Weiss, Japanese trickster; *idem*, *The God Susanoo*.

36 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 91; *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 57.

which was once a highly sought-after commodity in the early Japanese state.<sup>37</sup> Another variant story claims that Susanoo actually visited the kingdom of Silla in Korea before he arrived in Izumo:

[After being banished from Heaven], Susanoo no Mikoto, accompanied by his son Itakeru no Kami,<sup>38</sup> descended to the land of Silla and lived at the place Soshimori. Then he raised his voice and said: »I do not want to stay in this land.« Finally, he took clay and built a boat with it, boarded it and crossed over to the east until he reached the mountain peak Torikami, which is located at the headwaters of the Hi River in the land of Izumo.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, this is the only exception to the general exclusion of foreign countries in the *Nihon shoki*'s section on the Age of the Gods. This version's basic storyline is about a deity from Heaven who comes to Japan via Korea and becomes a local power. In the *Nihon shoki*, this is the fifth variant story of Susanoo's exile and therefore does not occupy a particularly prominent place. However, the *Sendai kuji hongi*, a variant of the mytho-chronology from the early Heian period, adopts precisely this episode in its account of Susanoo, thereby highlighting the genealogical connections to Korea implied therein.<sup>40</sup> We will encounter this pattern again in the next section, in the case of Ame no Hiboko.

While the *Kojiki* is generally more xenophobic than the *Nihon shoki*, we also find similar Korean subtexts in the *Kojiki* version of Susanoo's story: Here, three of his grandchildren bear names that suggest Korean origins. The first is Kara no Kami, lit. deity from Kara (Korea); the second is Sohori no Kami, which may allude to the Silla word for capital *sōbōl*; the third is Shirahi no Kami, which is close to Shiragi, the Japanese name of Silla.<sup>41</sup>

A final Korean subtext from a much later episode may be added here: According to the *Kojiki*, the Kyushu region where the Heavenly Grandson Ho no Ninigi descended to Earth (Mt. Takachiho) is »a land facing Kara«<sup>42</sup> (mentioned here for the first time in the *Kojiki*). This alludes to the proximity of Kyushu to the continent, which makes this region an »exceedingly good place«<sup>43</sup> for the arrival of the celestial deities. But why Kyushu? The explanation remains mysterious until we reinterpret Heaven, the place where the deities come from, as Korea. This is substantiated by the description of Korea in the historical part of the *Nihon shoki* as a country »outstretched like a reflection of Heaven in the water«.<sup>44</sup> In other words, it is conceivable that Korea was once more closely associated with Heaven, which might provide a rationale for why Kyushu, the region closest to the peninsula, was considered a fitting landing spot for heavenly »deities«.

37 Barnes, *State Formation in Japan*, 35.

38 Also known as Isotakeru, known from elsewhere as a god of trees.

39 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 91; see also *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 57.

40 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 93-95.

41 Weiss, *The God Susanoo*, 89-90; *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 40; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 66.

42 *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 50; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 80.

43 *Ko-Ji-Ki*, trans. Chamberlain, 135. See also *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 50; *Kojiki*, trans. Antoni, 80.

44 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 221.

Taken together, the Korean subtexts in the mythological sections of the chronicles reveal that there must have been an awareness of foreign countries in the Japanese mythology before its scriptural codification. This may be taken as a piece of evidence that Heaven can be actually read as a cipher for the continent. In the next section, I will further substantiate this claim by tracing the transformation of a Korea-related episode into a myth of universal dimensions.

#### *Ōkuninushi and Ame no Hiboko*

The episodes starting with Susanoo's exile and ending with his descendant Ōkuninushi can be regarded as a (largely fictitious) dynastic history of the rulers of Izumo who govern the people on Earth before the advent of the Tennō dynasty. Especially in the *Kojiki*, Ōkuninushi retains the characteristics of a creator god who performs tasks similar to those of the original couple, transforming the world into a place fit for human habitation. Ōkuninushi is identified by his very name as the »Great Lord of the Land/Earth«. However, he is also represented by a number of different names (e.g., Ōanamuchi, Ōmononushi) or titles that may have originally referred to similar, but geographically separated, creator gods. In most episodes, Ōkuninushi is portrayed as a very positive figure. Nevertheless, his ultimate role is to transfer his rule to the heavenly deities, ostensibly because his subjects on earth are »unruly« as described in »the yielding-of-land« episode (*kuni yuzuri*):

But in that land there were numerous deities which shone with a lustre like that of fireflies, and evil deities which buzzed like flies. There were also trees and herbs all of which could speak.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, Ōkuninushi's realm is depicted as a world of chaos with no clear distinction between gods, humans, animals, and plants. In due consequence, the heavenly deities dispatch two mighty »sword gods« as their vanguard tasked with convincing the Great Lord of the Land to yield his country to them.<sup>46</sup> As soon as they encounter Ōkuninushi, they draw their ten-span swords, stick them upside down in the earth, take seats on the tips of the swords, and question the earthly ruler.<sup>47</sup> According to the *Kojiki*, the two gods perform an even more impressive show when they stick their swords »upside down on the crest of the waves, sat cross-legged on their points, and questioned [Ōkuninushi]«. <sup>48</sup> This demonstration of power initiates a series of negotiations that eventually leads to Ōkuninushi's peaceful surrender.

The *Harima fudoki*, the gazetteer of the province of Harima mentioned above, comprises a scene bearing striking parallels to Ōkuninushi's story. Here, we encounter a culture hero

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45 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 64. This is also paraphrased in an ancient ritual prayer (*norito*), the Great Purification, which states that the heavenly deities expelled the unruly deities of Earth and »silenced to the last leaf the rocks and the stumps of the trees, which had been able to speak« (*Norito*, trans. Philippi, 45).

46 *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* list slightly different gods here: Take Mikazuchi (»Brave Mighty Thunderbolt« in Heldt's translation) and Ame no Torifune (»Bird Boat of Heaven«) as his assistant, according to the *Kojiki* (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 45.); and Futsunushi (Sword? Master) assisted by Take Mikazuchi, according to the *Nihon shoki* (*Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 67-68). Take Mikazuchi, who is present in both variants, originates from a sword.

47 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 68.

48 *Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 45.

called Ame no Hiboko (Sun Halberd of Heaven). Coming from Kara (Korea, or the continent), he settles in the land of a native deity/lord known by the name of Ugly Man of the Reed Plains, Ashihara no Shikoo. The text reads:

When he arrived from Kara, His Highness<sup>49</sup> Ame no Hiboko asked His Highness Ashihara no Shikoo to give him shelter at the mouth of the Uzu River [...] However, Ugly Man did not allow him to come ashore. Thereupon, the foreign god [*marebito no kami*] stirred the sea with his sword to form a whirlpool and sat on top of it. After witnessing this valorous feat, the landholder god [*aruji no kami*] became afraid of the foreign god.<sup>50</sup>

This episode seems to reflect quite realistically ethnic conflicts between an original population without technically advanced weapons and immigrants in possession of Korean ironware, who came to dominate the province. A notable parallel to the land-yielding episode of the imperial chronicles is the use of a spectacular, highly unusual kind of sword magic. This suggests a common motif that could be applied to a variety of similar settings. In Harima, a god/lord from Korea intimidates a local leader with this swordplay and ultimately takes away some of his land, while in Izumo, the messengers of Heaven use sword magic to force the leader of the earthly deities to abdicate.

Yet, even the Harima episode contains elements that point beyond a purely local event. Ame no Hiboko is described as coming from Kara; at the same time, his name seems to conflate two aspects of superior foreign status, namely descent from Heaven (*ame no*) and the possession of iron weapons (*hiboko*, »Sun Halberd«). The name »Ugly Man of the Reed Plains«, on the other hand, indicates »that this deity was not on the side of the eventual victors in the political strife that prevailed during the formative years of Japanese society«.<sup>51</sup> While »reed plains« is a common epithet of Japan in many ancient origin stories,<sup>52</sup> »ugly man« is definitely a pejorative term. However, the name is not specific to the *Harima fudoki*, but is also mentioned in the imperial chronicles as a nickname for Ōkuninushi.<sup>53</sup> This suggests that the parallels between the two stories are by no means coincidental. The Harima version may indeed represent the raw material, from which the yielding-of-land episode drew its inspiration. However, while the Harima account retained comparatively realistic elements, the land-yielding story turned the encounter into a myth of cosmological dimensions. Thus, Korea became Heaven and the local region became the entire Earth.

Interestingly, the figure of Ame no Hiboko also appears in the later parts of the chronicles that are no longer part of the Age of the Gods (or, the »mythology«) and describe the reigns

49 Highness (*mikoto*) can be used as a title of both divine beings and human rulers.

50 *Harima no kuni fudoki*, Iibo District (*Fudoki*, ed. Akimoto 304-305). Translation modified after *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 201.

51 *Records of Wind and Earth*, trans. Aoki, 17.

52 The name may refer to a wetland suited for rice cultivation and, by extension, to a territory that is yet to be cultivated/civilized. (Saijō, *Kojiki to ōke no keifugaku*; Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*, 163.)

53 According to the *Kojiki*, Ōkuninushi meets his ancestor Susanoo in the otherworld, Ne no Kuni, where Susanoo addresses him first as »ugly man« and finally, after a number of tests, as »great lord of the land«. (*Kojiki*, trans. Heldt, 30.) The name Ashihara no Shikoo is also mentioned without explanation in the *Nihon shoki* (*Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 59.)

of subsequent emperors in a more »historical« style, providing concrete (if largely fictitious) dates. According to the *Nihon shoki*, in the era of Emperor Suinin (trad. dates, 60 BCE–70 CE), a prince from Silla named Hiboko sought exile in Japan and was indeed granted some land by the emperor in Harima and in the neighboring region of Tajima.<sup>54</sup> In exchange, the prince brought precious treasures from his country.

Finally, Ame no Hiboko is also present in the origin story of a female shrine deity<sup>55</sup> that starts in Korea (and may originally be taken from there). The legend is contained in both the *Nihon shoki* (annals of Emperor Suinin)<sup>56</sup> and the *Kojiki* (annals of Emperor Ōjin). The female deity was born from a sunray, turned into a radiant beauty, and became the wife of Ame no Hiboko according to the *Kojiki*, or – in the *Nihon shoki* version – of Tsunoga Arashito, a different Korean prince, who was adorned with horns. As a daughter of the sun, the woman secretly went to Japan (the land of the rising sun) and eventually turned into a shrine deity. Her husband, however, followed her without ever finding her. According to the *Kojiki*, he was given land in compensation, while according to the *Nihon shoki*, he returned to Korea and founded the Kingdom of Mimana. None of these shrine legends contain the elements of conflict with locals or sword magic, but both point to the existence of a mythology where Korean princes and princesses play a significant role.

This web of stories suggests that Ame no Hiboko was a prototypical foreign prince, on whom several Korea-related motifs were projected. Judging from his name, Sun Halberd of Heaven, he was conceived as a figure of ultimately heavenly origin associated with the sun and with iron weapons. In the Harima legend, he intimidates a local »god« who is known as Ugly Man of the Reed Plains, also used as a nickname for Ōkuninushi. This suggests a strong relation between Ame no Hiboko and the two sword gods who intimidate Ōkuninushi in the land-yielding episode. From this, we can infer that the body of legends surrounding Ame no Hiboko became part of the myth of Ōkuninushi's surrender.

Still, the Korean culture hero was attractive enough to mention him also in the historical sections of the classics, where the narrative seems realistic, although the conflict between foreigners and locals is ignored. Here, I would like to emphasize the mythical journey of the main protagonist, which is either »from Heaven to Japan« (heavenly sword gods) or »from Heaven to Korea to Japan« (Ame no Hiboko). The difference relates to the narrative time, »mythical« or »historical«, in which the protagonists are active.

### *The Conquest of Yamato*

After the story of Ōkuninushi's surrender, the imperial mytho-history returns to the heavenly realm, starting with a lengthy description of Ninigi's inauguration as future ruler on Earth, which is followed by his descent in a pompous procession. While we would assume that he proceeds to Izumo where Ōkuninushi resided, or to the Yamato Basin where the Japanese state took shape, Ninigi instead descends to the remote region of Takachiho in central Kyushu.

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54 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 168–169.

55 In all versions, the deity is identified as Akaru-hime, who is venerated at the Himegoso Shrine in the region of present-day Ōsaka.

56 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 166–167.

Thus, he never meets Ōkuninushi, and his mission to govern »All Under Heaven« temporarily disappears from the narrative. Instead, a son and a grandson of Ninigi establish marriage relations with the deities of the sea. The political breakthrough of the Sun Dynasty does not occur until the next generation, when Ninigi's great-grandson, Jinmu, embarks on a military campaign to conquer the east, more specifically the Yamato region.



Figure 1: *Ho no Ninigi and his entourage of Heavenly Deities travel from Heaven to Earth.* Book illustration by Hosoda Tominobu, *Kamiyo no masagoto (True words of the Divine Age)* vol. 3, published 1827. National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, public domain (<https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/file/en/1248527>, accessed 26.06.2026)



Map 2: *Jinmu's conquest as described in the Nihon shoki*

Interestingly, according to the *Nihon shoki*, one reason for this military endeavor is the fact that a distant relative who »came down from Heaven in a rock boat«<sup>57</sup> had already established his rule in Yamato. When Jinmu and his army arrive in the region, they meet a fierce counterattack. Only after a long detour and massive divine intervention is Jinmu able to defeat the military leader of the Yamato people and make the region the center of his future empire. The battle is described in surprising detail, especially in the *Nihon shoki*. According to one theory, details of a dynastic conflict in the late seventh century, the Jinshin War (672), were woven into the story in order to conflate the image of Jinmu with a historical ruler, Tenmu Tennō (r. 673-686),<sup>58</sup> whose edict of 681 initiated the compilation of the imperial chronicles.

What is interesting in the Jinmu narrative is the mention of another clan of »heavenly deities«. The leader of that clan, a certain Nigihayahi, once married a local goddess and made his brother-in-law his general. It is actually this terrestrial brother-in-law who leads the army against Jinmu and offers stubborn resistance. Nigihayahi, on the other hand, submits to Jinmu's rule as soon as he recognizes him as a »relative« from Heaven.<sup>59</sup> Eventually, Nigihayahi's regime in Yamato is presented as a preparation of Jinmu's rule. As a reward for his submission, his descendants, the Mononobe, later become the most trusted vassals at the early Yamato court.

Thus, the conquest of Jinmu presents a more complex picture than the simple opposition of earthly and heavenly deities. We learn of the existence of heavenly descendants who are different from the imperial lineage and who intermarried with some earthly deities. Likewise, there is cultural and political diversity among the earthly deities, including savage groups of »earth spiders« who are hostile by definition, groups that willingly submit to Ninigi, and finally, respected opponents. Nevertheless, the implicit hierarchical gap between a mobile group of foreigners from »Heaven« and an immobile local population remains the same as in the land-yielding episode.

The implicit preference for mobile outsiders ends as soon as the narrative takes on a »historical« character from the reign of Jinmu Tennō onwards. This shift is marked by several narrative and paratextual changes, which indicate that ideas comparable to modern concepts of »mythology« and »history« existed in the minds of the ancient compilers. In both chronicles, the Age-of-the-Gods episodes, form a narrative of their own contained in the first (or first two) fascicles. The following fascicles begin to structure the narrative according to the reigns of »heavenly sovereigns« in the style of Chinese annals. Even if not much more than a sovereign's name is rendered during some of these reigns, the texts take pains to present an uninterrupted line of dynastic rulers. As mentioned, the *Nihon shoki* even provides exact dates for each rule. Moreover, neighboring countries are also explicitly mentioned. Thus, a seemingly objective, »historiographical« depiction of time and space replaces the ambiguous, »mythic« spatial and temporal dimensions of the Age of the Gods. In the *Kojiki*, these differences are reflected by the usage of different names for the realm of Earth (Japan): In the Age-of-the-Gods fascicle, the text speaks of the »Middle Land of the Abundant Reed Plains« (Toyo Ashihara no Naka tsu Kuni), implying a rich, but as-yet-uncultivated piece of land. After the Sun Dynasty

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57 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 128.

58 Duthie, Jinshin Rebellion.

59 According to the *Sendai kuji hongī*, it was Nigihayahi's son, who finalized peace with Jinmu.

takes power, however, the same area is referred to as »All Under Heaven« (*ame no shita; tenka*), originally a Chinese term for the politically ordered realm of the heavenly ruler.<sup>60</sup>

In this regard, the narrative after Jinmu's conquest takes on a »historical« character, despite the fact that the accounts of individual emperors remain replete with details that appear phantasmagorical or »mythical« to the modern reader. The distinction in the mindset of ancient storytellers can be chiefly attributed to the manner in which humans and deities engage with one another. Within the »mythical« narrative, the distinction between gods and men is frequently blurred; even when they appear as different groups, there is ample interaction between them. In »historical« times, humans inhabit the »visible realm«, while deities are considered to be imperceptible and can only be accessed through the use of magic or ritual.

### *The Conquest of Korea*

One of the mythical episodes in the »historical« parts of the chronicles recounts the conquest of Korea during the reigns of the 14th heavenly sovereign, posthumously called Chūai Tennō (trad. dates 149-200 CE), and his wife, Empress Jingū (trad. dates 169-269). The story starts with a campaign by Chūai against the Kumaso, a population of »rebels« in the southern parts of Kyushu. When he and Jingū arrive in Kyushu, Jingū is possessed by several deities who demand, speaking through her mouth, that Chūai direct his campaign to »a better land of treasures [where there are] gold and silver and bright colors in plenty«,<sup>61</sup> namely the land of Silla. Thereupon, Chūai ascends a hill and looks at the ocean, yet does not see any land. Although the gods (who later turn out to include Amaterasu) insist that there is a country »outstretched like a reflection of Heaven in the water«, the emperor does not believe them. By way of divine retaliation, Chūai dies, and Jingū takes over the task of fulfilling the divine command. Aided by maritime deities, Jingū assembles a naval force and traverses the Korean Strait. According to the *Nihon shoki*, the sight of Jingū's armada is enough to make the king of Silla submit, recognizing Japan as a »divine country«. He sends eighty ships full of treasures to Japan and promises to continue sending regular tribute. The sovereigns of the two other kingdoms on the peninsula, Goguryeo and Baekje, follow his example. In doing so, Jingū establishes a permanent vassal state relationship with the Korean countries.

According to both chronicles, the reign of Jingū's son, Ōjin Tennō (trad. dates 200-310), marked a peaceful era, which saw – among other things – the introduction of writing by a certain Wani clan from China. Modern scholars attribute a certain historical credibility to this report. However, the annals of Ōjin show no trace of the purported treaty between the Korean kings and his mother, nor are Ōjin and his mother associated with Korea in the Harima gazetteer, despite their relative prominence in this text. Thus, there seems little doubt that the conquest story is a fairly young »invented tradition« probably dating from the later seventh century shortly before the time when the imperial mytho-history was fixed in written form. At that time, Japan did indeed embark on a naval campaign to prevent Silla from assuming control of the other kingdoms on the peninsula. The battle was fought in the name of Empress Saimei (r. 655-661), who reigned to ensure the succession of her son after her

60 Kōnoshi, *Kojiki no sekaikan*; Wittkamp, *Arbeit am Text*, 163-166.

61 *Nihongi*, trans. Aston, 221.

husband's death. With the assistance of Tang China, Silla mounted a counteroffensive, resulting in a crushing defeat of the Japanese fleet in 663. Some Japanese historians such as Ōyama Seiichi proposed that the mythical conquest of Korea by an imperial consort was in fact a conscious reversal of these historical facts.<sup>62</sup> The xenophobic exclusion of mainland East Asia from the chapters on the Age of the Gods may also be attributed to this foreign policy setback.

Despite its mythological features, the conquest of Korea was widely accepted as historical fact in later centuries and became the foundation for various forms of anti-Korean propaganda in premodern as well as in modern historical contexts. The episode demonstrates that the mention of foreign countries in the »historical« parts of the imperial mytho-history was oftentimes accompanied by a sense of cultural superiority. Once more, I would like to emphasize that this was not the case in the contemporary *fudoki* genre.

### *Concluding Discussion*

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate that *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* – despite their ideological differences highlighted by *sakuhin-ron* scholars – share a common feature, namely the replacement of continental origins with heavenly ones. This is in stark contrast to the *fudoki*, in which both continental and celestial origins can serve as hallmarks of the rulers. This discrepancy in mythological-historical sources, which were produced around the same time, is the starting point of my analysis. It suggests that the imperial chronicles cannot (or cannot solely) be understood as ancient narrative traditions; rather, they were shaped by the political agenda of the time when the mythology was codified in written form. In conclusion, I will summarize this process more generally:

Among other things, this was a time of competing explanations of the world. The Japanese intellectual elite had come to regard their country as a member of Chinese civilization, yet from a Sinocentric position, Japan was considered a barbarian tribute state. The introduction of Buddhism, which coincided with the formation of the ancient Japanese state, presented India as yet another ideal country outside Japan. This must have led to fissures in Japan's self-imagination.

On the other hand, seventh-century *realpolitik* demonstrated the continent to be a source of danger, when Chinese intervention led to the unification of the Korean Peninsula under the regime of Silla despite Japanese military efforts to the contrary. Consequently, China and Korea ceased to simply be models of civilization, but also became a political threat. Japanese mythmakers responded by ignoring and denying the local dynasty's ethnic and cultural links to the continent, instead shifting real and imagined sites of foreign origin into the realm of the deities. In this sense, the Japanese annals may be regarded as a nostalgic effort to regain cultural independence from the continent.

This does not imply that the imperial mytho-history invented legends such as the dynasty's descent from Heaven from scratch. Comparative mythology has pointed out that this motif can be found all over Eurasia. Michael Witzel, for instance, discusses surprising parallels between Ninigi and the Indian demigod, Purūravas.<sup>63</sup> The motif of heavenly descent (both

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62 Ōyama, *Shōtoku Taishi*.

63 In both cases, the establishment of a dynasty is made possible by the marriage between a male deity from Heaven to an earthly female (Witzel, *Origins*, 174–175). Elsewhere, Witzel also points out surprising parallels

spatial and dynastic) is also present in Korean origin stories, most notably in the Dangun myth.<sup>64</sup> However, it seems to be lacking from Chinese annals that served as models of ancient Japanese historiography. Thus, scholars like Mizoguchi Mutsuko attribute the descent story to a »Northern« mythology that reached Japan relatively late, but was the foundation of the Tennō dynasty's myth of origin.<sup>65</sup>

In any case, it is clear that descent from Heaven to an aboriginal population on Earth was a shared commodity of many Eurasian cultures and was used in all kinds of dynastic foundation stories. Nevertheless, the distinctive feature of the Ninigi story is that the target of his descent is situated within the confines of the Japanese empire, ignoring external geography. This may seem natural, but regional sources reveal that a more complex pattern of descent from Heaven to Korea and then to Japan existed. One of these examples, the legend of Ame no Hiboko in the local gazetteer of Harima, reveals striking parallels with the land-yielding episode in the imperial chronicles, suggesting a common source. However, the omission of Korea in the Age-of-the-Gods narrative indicates a consistent revision of the original material. Thus, the local community in the Harima version turned into the aborigines on Earth and the continental conqueror into a messenger from Heaven. Similarly, the imperial chronicles also reinterpreted the origin of Susanoo and other figures.

Another universal motif embedded in the Japanese mytho-history is the concept of chaos preceding a golden age. In the Japanese case, this corresponds to the mythic era between the creation of the world and the time of Ho no Ninigi. As the chronicles maintain, this was a time when »evil deities buzzed like flies« and »trees and herbs all of which could speak«.<sup>66</sup> This mythic chaos is associated with the mythic space of the Middle Land of Abundant Reed Plains and an initial independence from Heaven. The surrender of Ōkuninushi and Ho no Ninigi's subsequent descent are recounted in a way as if chaos on Earth will be defeated thereafter. However, Ninigi's descent initiates a time of transition, marked by diplomatic negotiations and marriage relations. Ninigi's task is only completed by Jinmu's decisive battle, which finally leads to an explicit political stratification below a single ruler on Earth (Japan). While the narrative does not emphasize other aspects of civilizational »advancement«, it seems obvious that the dynasty from Heaven also familiarized people on Earth with iron weapons, mirrors, or silk weaving. In this sense, the Age-of-the-Gods narrative not only functions as a dynastic origin story, but also employs mythical elements to describe the advent of continental civilization, albeit without ever mentioning the continent itself. The distinction between the mythic chaos and the time of civilizational order after Jinmu is also emphasized by paratextual devices: The Age-of-the-Gods narrative employs »mythical« concepts of time and

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in the conquest of the East, which, in both ancient Indian and in Japanese mythology, occurs in the same lineage as the descent from Heaven. According to his interpretation, the motif can be interpreted as a search for the origin of the sun/fire (Witzel, *Marching east*).

64 In the *Samguk yusa* of Ilyeon (1206-1289), Dangun appears as an ancestor of the kingdom of Goguryeo (Ilyeon, *Samguk Yusa*, 49). It was only in later sources that he was presented as the founding figure of »Old Joseon«, the first mythical kingdom on the Korean peninsula. There, he features as the son of a deity from heaven and a bear woman from earth.

65 Mizoguchi, *Ōken shinwa*.

66 See above, fn 45.

space that defy any kind of measurement. From Jinmu's reign onward, however, the narrative adopts formal standards derived from Chinese historiography, such as the precise dating of individual reigns (*Nihon shoki*) or a kind of »fast facts profile« of the ruler at the beginning of each reign (*Kojiki*). There are no longer any gods who transcend the boundaries of heaven and earth: only overseas contacts between inhabitants of different countries.

It therefore appears that in the fascicles on the Age of the Gods, Heaven, and Earth embody a clear dichotomy that grants foreigners (the heavenly deities) the right to rule over locals (the earthly deities). The difference, however, is actually a gradual one: Susanoo, the »heavenly« ancestor of the earthly deities, is the pivotal figure here. His ambivalent nature enables the imperial compilers to construe a genealogical relationship between the deities of Heaven and Earth, while simultaneously justifying the submission of the latter. As descendants of Susanoo, the earthy deities are ultimately of »celestial« origin, but they are »terrestrial« in relation to the descendants of Ho no Ninigi, who descended from Heaven at a later point in time to replace Susanoo's lineage. Thus, to establish a hierarchy among the various descending deities, a principle is applied according to which the newcomer takes all. In other words, the longer a dynasty exists on Earth, the more susceptible it is to »unruly« disruptive forces that ultimately necessitate the establishment of a new regime from Heaven.<sup>67</sup>

This implicit legitimation of dynastic change ends when the heavenly dynasty establishes its supposedly ideal rule. From that point onward, foreigners no longer originate from Heaven, but only from the continent. Although they are often portrayed as possessing superior knowledge (such as writing) and are treated with due respect, they are by definition subject to the rule of the Sun Lineage (Yamato). At least in theory, they maintained their status as »foreigners« over generations (as the *Shinsen shōjiroku* reveals), implying that they were always of lesser status than families of divine origin. In this regard, the bearers of continental civilization – the Tennō dynasty and its court – could claim an elevated status in comparison to the local culture bearers, while simultaneously denying that status for »new« foreign arrivals following the purported establishment of the dynasty.

This double conceptualization of foreignness was a discursive strategy specific to the imperial chronicles. As we have seen, the regional myths from Izumo and Harima contain a positive image of Silla and express a desire to prove these areas' close relationship to that Korean region. In these legends, we recognize the peninsula in its true historical role as a hub of continental culture. By the eighth century, however, the self-esteem of the Japanese court had become strong enough to create a powerful counternarrative, using similar material as the regional gazetteers in a different narrative framing. The »mythological« Age-of-the-Gods sections of the imperial chronicles must therefore be seen as the ideologically most important and, at the same time, the youngest parts of these texts. These are myths of new social and geopolitical visions from the very period when the history of Japan's ruling dynasty was first recorded in writing.

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67 This may, in fact, reflect Chinese conceptualizations of the »mandate of Heaven« (*tianming*), which elucidates the historical transitions from one dynasty to another as a form of divine retribution for moral deficiencies.

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### List of Figures

Map 1: Korea and Japan around the early 7th century CE

Map 2: Jinmu's conquest as described in the *Nihon shoki*

Figure 1: Ho no Ninigi and his entourage of Heavenly Deities travel from Heaven to Earth.

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