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# JAPAN I. INTRODUCTION

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i. INTRODUCTION

The seventh-eighth century Japanese annals depict an early ruler (*tennō* "emperor") of Yamato, centered in the area of modern Nara Prefecture, as he hears for the first time about the rich land to the west—meaning Korea; the revelation comes from a god speaking through the king's wife (*Kojiki* 2.92, p. 257; *Nihon Shoki* [*NS*] I, pp. 221-22 [= year 193 C.E. in the archaizing *NS* chronology]). At least by the late 3rd century C.E., the "land of Wa" (the incipient kingdom of Yamato) does appear to be clearly engaged with China and the states of Korea; this is indicated by the early, if brief, account of Japan found in the Chinese history of the kingdom of Wei (tr. Tsunoda). In this same period, across Central Asia, links were being formed to further Sogdian trade (q.v. at *iranica.com*) with China, and these trade connections would facilitate communication and cultural exchange between the Iranian-speaking world and China and its sphere of influence into the Islamic period.

During the fourth-sixth centuries, while the Sasanian empire flourished in western Asia, state formation continued in Japan. Japanese involvement in the politics of the Korean peninsula, the settlement in Japan of Koreans and Chinese bringing their arts and crafts, more general diplomatic contacts, and commerce in luxury goods all created avenues for the Japanese to increase their knowledge of the mainland and, potentially, of what lay farther to the west. The flow of trade and material culture eastward from China to Japan,

directly or via Korea, was diverse and continuous enough so that foreign art and technology from the West, in original form as well as in Chinese interpretations, and even foreign artisans, might have been drawn along. The earliest historical immigrants from Korea, whether voluntary or sent as tribute, practice essential trades; they are weavers and seamstresses (*NS* I, pp. 349-50, 362-63 [years 463, 470]; *Kojiki* 127.6, p. 349), tanners (*NS* I, pp. 396, 397 [yr. 493]) and potters (II, p. 117 [587]). Such artisans are presumably meant also by the simple description "immigrants," who continue to arrive in small groups during the following centuries and receive assistance in settling (e.g., I, p. 396; II, pp. 38, 139, 371 [yrs. 493, 540, 608, 685]).

In the sixth century Buddhist proselytizing of Yamato from Korea developed in earnest, and the Japanese weighed the prestige and irresistibility in the west of this religion "from distant India" (*NS* II, p. 66) against the rights of the national gods (II, pp. 66-67 [yr. 552]). Not only clerics were sent to Japan in this effort, but image-makers and architects (p. 96 [yr. 577]), carpenters and metalworkers (II, p. 117 [yr. 588]), and teachers of Chinese language (II, p. 404 [yr. 691]). The products of Buddhism—images, incense-burners, sutras and technical literature (e.g., on geography and astronomy)—as well as the producers, reached Japan [e.g., II, pp. 65, 126 [yrs. 552, 602]). Gifts reported for the year 688 include "all kinds of colored fine silks" (II, p. 387), which, like earlier tribute of curtains and flags [II, p. 86 [yr. 562]), suggest the possible introduction of exotic western motifs (such as the silk shown below; see xi). The pursuit of Chinese dances and Korean music (II, pp. 144, 359 [yrs. 612, 683]) suggests a wide range of influence in court social activities: for example, the Japanese version of backgammon, *suguroku*, perhaps was a fairly recent import from China at the time it was banned (II, p. 395 [yr. 689]). This measure, whether or not it was an attempt to curb frivolity in general, may have a connection with the statement that the previous emperor once made his court gamble with him (II, p. 371 [yr. 685]).

The promotion of Buddhism in the state of Yamato in the seventh century (which was accelerated by Shōtoku Taishi [Prince], d. 622), together with the ongoing emulation of the Chinese imperial administration and Confucian morality, fostered use of the Chinese language and writing system, which gave access to Chinese literature and knowledge of the world. Student priests had begun to travel to China by 608 (*NS* II, p. 139), just four years after the date assigned to the seventeen-article constitution that is attributed to Shōtoku, which proclaimed Confucian ideals for the state and gave Buddhism an official

status in it (II, pp. 128-32). Two priests who were sent from Japan to study with Xuan Tsang, who had previously brought relics and copies of the Buddhist scriptures from India (II, p. 254 [yr. 658]), would have heard direct and personal report about the western world.

Also in the mid-seventh century it is reported, as two incidents, that men and women of "Tukhārā" reached Kyushu, blown by a storm (*NS* II, p. 246 [yr. 654]) or having drifted from Amami Island at the northern end of the Ryukyu chain (II, p. 251 [yr. 657]; cf. a made-up story of a ship drifting to the same landfall in Kyushu, II, p. 101 [yr. 583]). The people may be though to be Iranians originally of Ṭoḵārestān in northern Afghanistan (Barthold, *Turkestan*3, pp. 66-68; *Ḥodūd al-ʿālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 108-9). They are not stated to be merchants, nor as pursuing the East China Sea sailing route to Kyushu—from the Yangtze basin, Fukien (modern Fujian Province, China), or southeast Asia—or the northern route to Kyushu from the Yellow Sea and Korea. The fact that both incidents are reported in summer to early fall (4th month and 7th month, respectively), a relatively good sailing time, is inconclusive: in the 4th month of year 570 a Korean envoy is reported to have missed landfall (presumably Kyushu), and his ship was blown well northeastward to the shore of Echigo (Niigata Prefecture; *NS* II, p. 87; cf. Tungus fishermen reaching that area from the north—Hokkaido—or across the Sea of Japan: II, p. 58 [yr. 544]). There are no details to identify the people of Tokhārā as refugees from the recent Arab conquest of Iran or as Sasanian envoys, although Ṭoḵāre-stān was a last refuge of Sasanian resistance at that time (Pulleyblank, p. 425). At least one of them intended to return to his homeland, apparently by land, after first visiting the T'ang court at the capital, Chang'an (II, p. 266 [yr. 660]), which suggests a possible diplomatic mission. He is referred to by name and appears comfortable in the East Asian milieu; perhaps he belonged to the Sogdian trading network. (See also iv, below.)

Maritime trade between Japan and China and the exchange of Buddhist scholarship continued—more reliably than diplomatic exchanges—through Japan's Heian period (794-1185) and the medieval shogunates. As both Chinese and Arab seafaring expanded and crossed paths in Southeast Asia, opportunities occurred for chance contacts between Persians and Japanese in the course of travel and trade. A relic of such a meeting is described below (see iv). Marco Polo's residence in China took place in the period of consolidation of Mongol control over China, in which there also occurred two failed naval expeditions against Japan (1274, 1281). His information on Japan (*Chipen-gu*,

"land of Nippon") probably reflects this recent turbulence as well as the perspective of the Chinese annals (bk. III, chaps. 2-3 and 4; Yule, II, pp. 253-66). He points out the remoteness and independence of the island nation, and the difficulty of access by sea, but he also explains how the seasonal monsoons are utilized for sailing the East China Sea east and west (Yule, II, p. 264). The 7,459 islands mentioned by mariners as found in this "Sea of Chin" (ibid.), and other points in this part of the narrative (bk. III, chap. 4 [Yule]) seem to better indicate the Philippines; and perhaps Marco Polo and his informants viewed all the north-south island chains above Indonesia as one continuous series. Similarly, the Syrian writer Abu'l-Feda (d. 1331), after describing Java, Vietnam (Champa), and Cambodia (Qemār), reports on the many "little islands of China" (p. 369) that lay farther east and aligned north and south, and he does not separately take note of Japan.

The close control of mercantile activity in the Japanese ports during medieval times may help account for the sparseness of foreign merchants there that is mentioned by Marco Polo. Nevertheless, Persian luxury goods reached Japan by trade or diplomacy (see below, xi, for examples). Subsequently, the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1857) enforced the isolation of the country more effectively than had the medieval shogunates, and this control is described in detail by the report of the Safavid mission to Siam in 1685 (O'Kane, pp. 193, 194; on this text, see SAFINE-YE SOLAYMĀNI at *iranica.com*). In spite of the limited access to Japan, Westerners had considerable information about it; as they gathered at the Siamese court and vied for the king's favor, they could relate fact as well as hearsay to the Persian merchant community there. The secretary of the mission set down what he heard of the country, people, and king of Japan, craft products and trade practices, precious metals and coinage, besides a Dutch view of the rivalry with the Portuguese there (O'Kane, pp. 188-98). The presence of many Chinese artisans in Japan also is noted (p. 197). (On the Persian presence in Siam, see THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS at *iranica.com*.)

Direct contact and observation of each other by Persians and Japanese would wait for the establishment of Japan's relations with the world by the modernizing administration of the Meiji period (1868-1912). The remaining sections of this entry discuss the course of Iranian-Japanese official relations and other interaction since that time and the study in Japan of Iranian languages, history, and culture.

For Iranians in East Asia, see also CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS.

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