The recorded origins of Japan’s imperial line begin at Takachiho, a remote area steeped in ancient myths high in the mountains of southern Kyushu. Here in Miyazaki Prefecture people find it natural enough to call their region the ‘land of legend’. Situated far inland, the Takachiho district in particular retains a strong identity as a ‘sacred’ area. From the landscape it is not difficult to see why. Invariably swathed in cloud, even the upper slopes of these steep gorges are walled in by mountains on all sides. The weather can turn suddenly, as veils of mist frequently descend to crowd the field of view. Looking down, the thickly-wooded slopes drop to seemingly impossible depths, and threads of water trace a path through the rapids on the valley floors below. In some places, jade-coloured streams flow beneath cliffs of basalt columns, suggesting powerful natural forces at work. The impression of superhuman strength shaping the landscape is reinforced by the massive boulders that have been hurled down on the riverbanks through the effects of weathering on these towering slopes.

The iconic image often photographed at the scenic Takachiho Gorge is a sheet of white water plunging from the top of a cliff into the deep green river below. This is just one example of how the natural setting has influenced human activity in the area. Together with forestry, livestock and crop cultivation – mostly vegetables and tobacco – tourism now forms a central part of the Takachiho economy. It is partly sustained by the Takachiho Railway that links these inaccessible mountains to the small city of Nobeoka on the east coast, a line recently threatened...
with closure but since revived under private ownership. On some days each year the station staff greet their passengers dressed in the ancient costumes more commonly seen in the ceremonial dances performed at Shinto shrines.

Partly because of its evocative landscape Takachiho is littered with sacred places bearing names such as the ‘Hall of the Gods’ and the ‘Cave of the Sun Goddess’. Often these are marked by wooden shrines that can indeed look as old as the hills. In the eighteenth century there were as many as 554 shrines in the area, although most were closed down a century later when the new Meiji state stipulated one shrine for each village. Sacred sites and shrines still abound nonetheless. For anyone interested in dynastic roots, one place of note is Mt Futagami, a short distance outside the town of Takachiho. This unprepossessing hill does not really stand out from the surrounding landscape, but according to legend it marks the junction between the celestial plain and the earth below, and the place where, one day several aeons ago, the ‘floating bridge of heaven’ (Ame no Uki Hashi) was joined with the land of men. It was this temporary pontoon of cloud that allowed Ninigi, august grandson of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, to appear in what is called ‘the descent of the heavenly race’ (tensō kōrin). Touchdown on Mt Futagami heralded the arrival of the Yamato rulers of Japan, a dynasty that continues, more or less, unbroken to the present day.

This at least is the narrative that unfolds in Japan’s earliest histories, compiled several centuries after the ‘event’ they describe. The written word, it would appear, came late to these islands, when Chinese letters were imported in the sixth century. No earlier texts survive, either because the inhabitants had no script of their own, or because any documents they kept have since perished. The theory of an earlier indigenous written language known as jindai moji is generally considered to be a fabrication created during the eighteenth century. The earliest extant records, therefore, are sixth-century transcriptions based on oral accounts that recall memories of a former time. These include Teiki (Imperial Record), a genealogy of the Yamato line, and Kuji (Ancient Tales), a collection of ‘house histories’ compiled by prominent families near the court to promote their own lineage. It was not until early in the eighth century that a systematic attempt was made to construct a dynastic chronicle in the style of Chinese models to place on record the background of the imperial line. This was based on the recitations provided