CHAPTER 3

TSUKUSHI:
ISLE OF UNKNOWN FIRES

From Saga City, near the Yayoi remains of Yoshinogari, the main road north heads across the plain and then winds through wooded mountains before reaching the north Kyushu coast. The spectacular stretch of coastline here in Karatsu Bay is called Niji no Matsubara, or ‘Rainbow Forest of Pines’ after its long bow-shaped beach flanked by trees. Its sheltered position makes it second perhaps only to Hakata Bay further to the east as a safe haven for ships. Today the journey from Saga features a recently built landmark as the road runs through the mountains to the sea. Around a corner on the approach to a services area near the town of Kyūragi, an impressive white statue looms into view. Standing forty-six feet high and rotating gently, this giant figure of a young woman – wearing loose robes and with one hand held aloft – recalls at first glance the Statue of Liberty, until closer inspection reveals she is waving a cloth.

This is Sayō-hime, the celebrated beauty who, according to legend, captured the heart of the general of the Yamato army when he passed this way in 537.1 Ōtomo Sadehiko, a renowned military leader, was bound for Karatsu to lead his troops across the sea to fight in the Korean peninsula. Shortly before leaving he married Sayō-hime, and so she joined him in Karatsu as the expedition prepared to embark. Her statue recalls the scene when, as Sadehiko’s ship set sail, she climbed a hill near the shore and waved farewell from the top. From this episode the site takes its name of Hirefuri no Mine (scarf-waving hill). In one version, Sayō-hime is held to have been so distraught that she followed the fleet in a small boat as far as the nearby port of Yobuko where, in her grief, she turned to stone.2
Although little more than a tale of courtly love transferred to the country, this legend reflects the considerable political changes that had taken effect by the mid-sixth century. The island of Kyushu, or at least the northern part, was now generally known as Tsukushi to the courtiers of the growing Yamato state. Viewed from their capital in the Nara basin it was a mysterious region in the outer reaches of the realm. In the verse that they wrote, military officials posted to this far-off land conveyed the sense of a remote frontier zone. Examples such as this one were later included in the Man'yōshū (Songs of Myriad Leaves), Japan’s oldest anthology of poetry compiled in the mid-eighth century.

Our Sovereign’s far-off court
Is Tsukushi, the isle of unknown fires
It is the citadel defending
Her Empire against the foreign enemy

The ‘unknown fires’ cited here refer to the light effects that still appear in the inland seas enclosed by the islands off the west coast of Kyushu. It was only in the early twentieth century that a scientific explanation was finally offered for this natural phenomenon, when it was identified as a type of mirage. This rare optical illusion has been compared with a similar effect found in Lake Geneva, but is becoming increasingly difficult to see due to the prevalence of electric lighting along the coast and now polluted water. Recalling a time when it was a defining local feature, however, there is a town on the coast of the Ariake Sea in the north of Kumamoto Prefecture called Shiranui (literally ‘unknown fire’). Further south along the coast is another stretch of water called the Shiranui Sea.

According to the Nihon Shoki it was this sea, rather than the region’s volcanoes, that gave Kumamoto its reputation as the ‘Land of Fire’ (Hi no Kuni). It records how, on one occasion, having subjugated the recalcitrant Kumaso people of the region in battle, the ‘emperor’ Keikō was travelling along this coastline one night when, catching sight of some lights out at sea, none of his followers could answer his question, ‘Whose fire is this?’ In the Hizen no Kuni Fudoki (Gazetteer of Hizen Province), the episode is attributed instead to a victorious general who was serving under Keikō, and when the emperor later