REVIEW ARTICLE


Reviewed by Donald F. McCallum

This book, the most comprehensive treatment of early Japanese history yet to appear in English, is required reading for all scholars and students concerned with the formative time span comprising the Yayoi 弥生, Kofun 古墳, Asuka 飛鳥, Hakuhō 白鳳, and Nara 奈良 periods. Joan Piggott has mastered a very extensive secondary literature in modern Japanese, carefully studied the primary sources and archaeological material, and read deeply in theoretical discussions dealing with the “origin of the state,” broadly conceived. More than just summarizing the conclusions of our Japanese colleagues, the author consistently advances her own hypotheses and interpretations. Occasionally these may seem daring; in any case this review will reflect a more skeptical point of view.

In the “Introduction” we are informed that the author’s methodology is what she terms an “archaeology of kingship” (p. 3). Extending this metaphor, Piggott tells us that she will “cut temporal cross sections” (trenches) through seven historical epochs. These seven, covering some six centuries, are the periods of: (1) Himiko 卑彌呼 (third century), (2) Yūrakuchō 雄略 (fifth century), (3) Suiko 推古 (late sixth century–early seventh century), (4) Tenjō 天智 (ca. third quarter of the seventh century), (5) Tenmu 天武 and Jitō 持統 (fourth quarter of the seventh century), (6) the period of the development of the Ritsuryō 律令 system (early eighth century), and (7) Shōmu 聖武 (second quarter of the eighth century), with a chapter devoted to each. In a sense, the work consists of seven separate monographs, although considerable material is included in individual chapters to bridge the gaps lying between the main areas of focus.

Much of the “Introduction” is devoted to a presentation of a variety of theoretical perspectives, which the author proposes to incorporate into her project, including the work of numerous scholars not dealing specifically with Japan. This material is difficult to assimilate, but many
readers will undoubtedly find it useful to see it applied to the Japanese case. Naturally, Piggott also acknowledges and assesses the work of scholars dealing directly with early Japan, both foreign and Japanese.

Piggott offers a stimulating assessment of the nature of the “monarch” in early Japan; from the outset she commendably eschews the inappropriate “emperor” as a translation of the term *tennō* 天皇 (p. 8). In dealing with the transition from chieftain to “Great King” (*Ōkimi* 大王), she focuses on the sacral and diplomatic dimensions of rule, stating: “Kings were apical rather than autocratic, and their major focus was creation and maintenance of a hierarchy of status and prestige over which they officiated as ‘king of kings’” (p. 6). Much of the book is devoted to developing the implications of this insight, probing the sacral status of the paramounts and a major shift Piggott sees occurring around 600.

More specifically, the author tells us that she has developed a model which she calls “Japan as a secondary state formation within the Chinese sphere of influence,” and directs our attention to Fig. 1, “A logical representation of Japanese state origins.” This diagram is rather complicated, and while it may be helpful in clarifying her approach, many readers will be struck by the absence of Three Kingdoms Korea. Although the text refers to Korea from time to time, much greater emphasis is placed on China, the Chinese monarchy, and Chinese ideology throughout the book. While no scholar would deny the deep influence of China on both the Korean peninsula and the Japanese islands, I believe this study does not pay adequate attention to the northeast Asian cultural sphere of the early first millennium AD that was so crucial for developments in both the peninsula and the islands. Instead, what it espouses is a rather traditional, Sino-centric approach, somewhat surprisingly considering that Japanese specialists are just now striving for a more balanced assessment of peninsular/insular relations.

Piggott concludes the “Introduction” by stating: “Japanese colleagues are bemused by the scope of this book. Why, they ask, should a single scholar undertake a study spanning six centuries?” (p. 13). Although Piggott is certainly courageous in tackling such a long period, one fraught with difficult problems, I am not entirely convinced that her approach is the most satisfactory. A narrative history, summarizing what is known about the period, would be a significant contribution; similarly, an in depth monograph on any of the seven chapter-topics would be very welcome. The problem, of course, is whether it is possible to combine the two approaches in one book at this stage of research.

The account begins in Chapter 1, “Himiko, Paramount of Wa,” with the Yayoi 弥生 period, here dated as 300 BC to AD 300, but now often as 400 BC to AD 250 (in all cases, circa). Given the author’s aims,