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Horses, Dragons, and Disease in Nara Japan

Although the introduction of horses into the Japanese islands has long been a topic of interest for scholars concerned with political and military relations between the Japanese islands and the Korean peninsula, their role in shaping cultic life in the Japanese islands has received surprisingly little attention. Because horses were a central node within the technological, political and ritual systems that formed the material and ideological basis of the Japanese court, however, they helped engender a series of cultic developments that were essential for the formation of what later generations would come to consider native Japanese religious and cultic identity. This article argues that myths and legends of deadly horse-riding spirits were most likely shaped not by the memory of ancient horse riding armies, but rather by a host of forces that included immigrant deities, natural disasters and plagues from which even rulers were hard pressed to escape.

KEYWORDS: Egami Namio 江上波夫 — horse riders — Shōtoku — *chimata* 衢 — *ekijin* 疫神 — Gion Matsuri 祇園祭

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IN 1948, WHEN Egami Namio first proposed that the Japanese islands had been overrun by a group of horse riders from the Korean peninsula in the fourth century CE, he set off one of the longest running academic controversies in the field of Japanese history. Neatly standing prewar Japanese claims to historical dominion over the Korean peninsula on their head, Egami's thesis succeeded in undermining a major pillar of Japanese imperialism. Beyond this, Egami's thesis also possessed the considerable virtue of accounting for a dramatic transformation in the technological and political structures of the Japanese islands in the centuries that gathered force during this same period. As a result, in no small part thanks to the work of Egami, scholars of ancient Japanese history came to regard the Korean peninsula as a major force in the formation of the political and cultural norms of the Japanese islands. Less felicitously, however, Egami's work also helped establish ancient Japanese history as a central node of the Korean as well as Japanese nationalist discourses. As a result, although very little archeological evidence has emerged to support Egami's theory in the subsequent decades, numerous modified versions of the horse rider hypothesis still hold sway among many scholars on the Korean peninsula.¹

Much of the impetus for the horse rider theory came from a new reading of the figures of Jingū 神功 and Ōjin 応神, two semi-historical ancestors of the royal house and pillars of Japanese nationalism. In the decades following Egami's bombshell, several scholars noted that even as the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* state that Jingū successfully invaded the Korean peninsula and subjugated the Korean kingdom of Silla 新羅, they also depict immigrant lineages flocking to the Yamato court during the very same period.² By the 1970s scholars such as Gary Ledyard were suggesting that the court chronicles were a reworking of earlier legends in which these figures arrived in the Japanese islands not as returning conquerors, but rather as heads of a new aristocracy that overran the

1. For a representative sampling of Egami's views as they have developed over the years, see EGAMI 1984, 1986, and 1992. For by far the best discussion of the historiography of relations between the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula during this period see FARRIS 1998, 55–122. For Korean scholarship on the issue, see KIM Jong-häk 1980, and CHON 1975.

2. For a recent effort to present Ōjin as a conqueror from the Korean peninsula, see ISHIWATARI 2001. I realize that the concept of “immigrant,” like race or ethnicity, is socially constructed. In the following pages I will use the term “immigrant kinship group” to refer to any kinship group that claims as its founding ancestor a figure that was said to have come to the Japanese islands from across the sea. I will similarly use the term “immigrant deity” to refer to any god that is explicitly said to have crossed over to the Japanese islands from across the sea. Similarly, I shall in most cases use the term “Yamato”—an early term for the Japanese islands— in place of “Japan” in order to highlight the fact that “Japan” itself was being constructed at just this time.

Japanese islands with cavalry. Ledyard surmised that, after having established themselves as rulers of the Japanese islands, these horse riders subsequently lost their influence on the Korean peninsula. As a consequence of this, he argued, the descendants of the horse riders changed their narratives of conquest, promoting the fiction that it was the Korean peninsula that had been conquered (LEDYARD 1975, 217–54).³

One ironic consequence of the heavy ideological freight borne by this discourse has been the unintentional support it has lent to a series of prewar nationalist premises concerning the royal house, the Japanese nation, and the relationship between cult and kingship in ancient Japan. In spite of the iconoclastic intent of many of the horse rider theory's proponents, the desire on the part of the theory's advocates to resist Japanese nationalist assertions has often led to a fairly crude hermeneutic of suspicion in which myths, rites, and legends are read not within their cultic and cultural horizons of reception, but rather as coded historical/political messages.

For the scholar of early Japanese religion, this discourse has thus perpetuated at least three premises that have retarded efforts to understand the political and religious institutions of the Japanese islands within the context of the cultural complexity and diversity of the age. The first such premise has been an almost theological belief in the continuity between the cultural and religious traditions of the fourth century and the present (KIM Tarisu 1970; EGAMI 1981). Though patently anachronistic—neither the Japanese nor Korean nations existed at the time—much of this discourse has taken place under the rubric of investigating the history of relations between Japan and Korea (FARRIS 1998, 56–57).

A second premise, again almost certainly related to the Korean colonial experience, can be seen in a pervasive tendency to read religious institutions and myths as directly mirroring contemporaneous political institutions. These assumptions, in turn, have reinforced a third assumption; namely, that prewar Japanese power structures, which were heavily invested in the rhetoric of powerful rulers working in conjunction with the kami of the Japanese islands, were also operative in ancient times.

This essay will adopt an alternative approach to the question of the role of horses in the formation of Japanese culture that is less rooted in discourses of nationalism and resistance. In place of Meiji-Era premises concerning powerful rulers and cooperative “native” gods, this essay will argue that relations between

3. Ledyard's views, however, elicited a powerful archeologically-based counterargument in EDWARDS 1983, 265–95. In Japan as well, difficulties in constructing a coherent chronology of events, coupled with a near total absence of evidence of any invasion have meant that the horse rider theory has left the mainstream of academic discourse even in its most modified forms. For criticisms of the theory as well as the often speculative methodology of its proponents, see SAHARA 1993 and MIZUNO 1975. Egami's intellectual heirs, however, continue to publish today. See, for example, Ōwa 1981 and YAMAZAKI 1999.

rulers and kami during the period were frequently characterized by fear and antagonism. Rather than assume that political power led to cultic hegemony, it will argue that the expansion of Yamato power across the Japanese islands directly fueled the cultic and physical insecurity of rulers. Finally, throughout this essay I will bracket the question of whether mounted conquerors ever came to the shores of the Japanese islands. Instead, my focus shall be upon the beasts of burden that were materially and cultically central to the formation of the purportedly native institutions of the Japanese royal cult.

The pages that follow will thus seek to shed light on pre-modern cultic norms by treating horses as a central node within the technological, political, and ritual systems that formed the material and ideological basis of the Japanese court. Because the introduction of horses facilitated the transmission of continental rites and legends to the Japanese islands, we shall see that they also helped engender a series of cultic developments that were essential for the formation of what later generations would come to consider native Japanese religious and cultic identity. By the early Heian period (794–1185), myths and legends concerning deadly horse-riding spirits helped set the cultic and political parameters for understanding such diverse phenomena as disease, drought, and even the character of the royal lineage. I will thus suggest that, seen in this light, the myths and legends of the court may have been shaped not so much by the memory of ancient horse riding armies, but rather by a host of forces that included immigrant deities, natural disasters, and plagues from which even rulers were hard-pressed to escape.

Rain Making and Rulers

Among the most important developments in the study of early Japanese religion in the past two decades has been the discovery of thousands of clay horse figurines (*umagata* 馬形) and other animals, along with numerous animal and cow bones that were apparently used in rites of sacrifice. These discoveries not only add to a mountain of evidence contradicting popular conceptions of kami worship in ancient Japanese religion, they also raise a broader set of questions concerning the cultic effects that the introduction of equestrian culture had upon the formation of a host of purportedly native religious and cultural institutions (KANeko 1999).

Such questions arise because, regardless of whether or not the earliest horses in the Japanese islands carried on their backs an army of invaders, it is highly likely that they did carry with them a set of cultural and ritual connections that stretched back millennia. Evidence of the ritual and practical significance of horses in ancient Chinese civilization can be seen in texts such as the *Chou-li* 周礼, or *Rites of Chou*, which contains two fascicles dedicated exclusively to delineating the roles of an extended bureaucracy charged with caring for and utilizing

horses. In addition to their economic and military importance, the proper care of horses was also a matter of substantial cultic import; as supremely *yang* animals, the waxing and waning of horses (and the horse star) were believed to have a dramatic impact on the balance of *yin* and *yang* forces across the entire nation.⁴

From a very early date horses in China also came to be associated with dragons. Thus Chinese court ritual texts stipulated that the ruler's carriage be pulled by "dragon-horses" 龍馬 adorned with ornamentation that was harmonized with the fluctuating rhythms of *yin* and *yang* (MAJOR 1993, 217–68). Not only did such ceremonies highlight the longstanding characterization of the ruler as a dragon among men, they also aptly summarized many of the requirements and realities of kingship; rulers not only required cavalry and speed of communication to rule their realms, they also claimed divine sanction for their rule based in part on their ability to regularly produce acceptable amounts of rain. By the Han dynasty, the ability of rulers to ensure adequate and timely supplies of rainfall was not only considered an indispensable attribute of kingship, droughts and floods were also viewed as signs of Heaven's displeasure with the ruler's virtue. As a result of such concerns, much of the Chinese ritual calendar was designed to keep both the ruler and the nation in harmony with the seasonal cycles, thereby preventing potentially disastrous imbalances of *yin* and *yang* (NAKAMURA 1993).

One suggestion that by the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki* such conceptions had gained currency in the Japanese islands can be seen from the following account from the Kōgyoku 高極 chapter of the *Nihon shoki*, in which the purportedly ambitious Soga 蘇我 kinship group is shown competing with the Yamato ruler Kōgyoku to produce rain:

Kōgyoku 1.7.25 The Ministers discussed the matter among themselves, saying "Following the teachings of the local shrine leaders in the villages, there have been some places where people have killed horses and cattle as a sacrifice to the gods of various shrines, and in other places there have been frequent relocations of the market places, while in others prayers have been offered to the River Earl 河伯. [Yet] none of these practices has had any effect. Then the Soga no Ōomi 蘇我大臣 responded, saying, "The Mahayana sutras ought to be read in the temples and repentance rites should be performed in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. [We should then] reverently pray for rain."

27th day. In the southern courtyard of the Great temple, images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and the four Heavenly Kings were magnificently adorned. An assembly of priests was requested to read the *Great Cloud Sutra*. At this time the Soga no Ōomi himself took a censer in his hands, burnt incense in it, and petitioned [for rain].

4. Thus two of the eleven fascicles of the *Rites of Chou* are devoted to describing the rites and duties of those charged with affairs related to horses. See LIN 1997, 289–356.

28th day. A slight rain fell.

29th day. Because the prayers for rain had not succeeded, the reading of the sutras was discontinued.

8th month, 1st day. The *tennō* 天皇 went to the source of the Minabuchi 南淵 river and knelt down in worship towards the four quarters. Looking up to Heaven, she [then] prayed for rain. Thereupon there was thunder and a great rain which fell for five days, bestowing water across the land. (One writing says, “For five days there was continuous rain, and the nine grains ripened.”)

At this the common people across the land cried out together, “Banzai!” and exclaimed, “A ruler of supreme virtue!” (NSK *Kōgyoku* 1.7.25 through 1.8.1)

This fascinating text has drawn the attention of scholars interested in the relationship between Buddhism and local cults during the period on the one hand or the struggle between the Soga and *Kōgyoku* for political supremacy on the other. A broader and perhaps more central point, however, is that, regardless of its historical accuracy, the text takes for granted the belief that the ability to cause rainfall was an essential attribute of rulership.

Perhaps more importantly, for our purposes, the text also suggests the degree to which continental models of kingship and rainmaking were associated with horses in Nara cultic practice. Most obviously, this can be seen from the purported recommendations of local shrine officials to relocate the markets near the court while conducting sacrifices of horses and cattle. Although such passages are often dismissed as literary inventions, the *Shoku Nihongi* contains at least one entry where markets at the capital were moved as an antidote to prolonged drought (SNG Keiun 2.6). Even more tellingly, in spite of postwar claims that the Buddhist and “Shintō” traditions abhorred bloodshed, archeological and textual evidence strongly suggest that horses were not infrequently sacrificed in order to bring about rain or to prevent disasters (UEDA 1992; SEGAWA 1991).

Also of note in this regard are the stylized exclamations of “A ruler of supreme virtue!” within the text, which also suggest that the text’s editors were invoking Chinese conceptions of cosmic resonance (*kan-ying* 感応) to define *Kōgyoku*’s relationship with Heaven. Other forms of rainmaking based upon the principle of resonance in China included the burial of animal figurines in the earth in order to stimulate rainfall. Recent discoveries across the Japanese islands of numerous clay figurines of animals such as horses, cows, and even chickens that were buried in the ground strongly suggest that such practices were widespread across the Japanese islands as well (CHIBAKEN BUNKAZAI SENTĀ 1984, 351–54).

In addition to the small horse figurines that were buried in the ground in the hopes of spurring rainfall, much larger earthen figures were also frequently placed around the tombs of the ancestors of rulers and powerful lineages. The degree to which such ritual implements were implicated in larger cultic discourses involving horses, kingship, and the Korean peninsula can be seen in the following legend from the Asukatobe district 飛鳥戸部郡 of Kawachi

province 河内国, the main base of a cluster of immigrant lineages from the Korean kingdom of Paekche such as the Tanabe no Fubito 田辺文 and the Fumi no Obito 書首:

The province of Kawachi reported: “Tanabe no Fumi Hakuson of the Asukato-tobe District had a daughter who was married to Fumi no Obito Karyō in the Furuichi District. Hakuson, hearing that his daughter had given birth to a child, went to his son-in-law’s house to congratulate them. [That night] as he was returning under the moonlight, beneath the tomb of Homuda [Ōjin] at Ichibiko Hill, he met someone riding a red horse. The horse at times would contort itself and then fly like a dragon, [at times] it would suddenly fly up like a great bird that was startled into flight.... The horse’s rider understood that Hakuson wanted the [the steed] so he stopped and exchanged horses [with him], whereupon they took their leave of each other. Hakuson, having obtained the steed, was delighted. He rode back and entered his stable, where he took off his saddle, fed the horse, and went to sleep. The next morning the red horse had been transformed into clay. Hakuson marveled at this and returned to the tomb, where he found his spotted horse among the clay horses there. He then brought it back in exchange for the clay horse.”

(NSK Yūryaku 9.7.1)

Beyond its simple interest as a story, this text raises the intriguing question of why the court would wish to depict one of its ancestors as a spirit riding across the roadways of the Japanese islands. Although not overtly political, the text clearly reflects the considerable linkage between rulers, immigrants, and horses within the political and cultic discourses of the period. Fortunately, by explicitly associating the spirit of Ōjin with immigrant lineages such as the Tanabe and the Fumi no Obito, the text also suggests that the key to understanding the cultic relationship between rulers, ancestors, and horses may be found in the cultic practices of the immigrant lineages most closely associated with raising and training horses for the court.

Horse Riding Spirits and Disease

As we have already seen, the advent of horses to the Japanese islands was almost certainly related to large-scale immigration from the Korean peninsula to the Japanese islands in the third and fourth centuries. The *Nihon shoki* states that several prominent immigrant lineages from the Korean peninsula arrived during Ōjin’s reign. Among the most important immigrants that the text states arrived at this time were the founding ancestors of the Kawachi no Aya 西漢, Yamato no Aya 東漢 and Hata 秦 kinship groups. Because these lineages played a major role in the political and material transformation of the Japanese islands in the sixth and seventh centuries, their influence over the formation of the political institutions of the Nara period (710–784) and beyond was enormous. Equally

importantly for our purposes, however, their influence over cultic developments in the Japanese islands—including the role of horses within cultic discourses on everything from rainmaking to disease prevention—may have been just as substantial (UEDA 1965; MIZOGUCHI 1987; KATŌ 1998).

Lineages such as the Yamato no Aya and the Kawachi no Aya played a vital role in the formation of the *tennō* system in two distinct yet profoundly related ways. On the one hand, the material and governmental technologies that they brought with them made possible increasing levels of social control, which in turn allowed rulers to project their power and draw resources across ever larger distances. On the other hand, these same lineages also introduced new cultic forms from the peninsula involving not only Confucian conceptions of centralized rule, and so on, but also rites of spirit pacification, rainmaking and the control of disease. These kinship groups are also notable, finally, for the fact that they were all at the forefront of the early cult of Prince Shōtoku 聖德, the purported patron/savior of the Japanese Buddhist tradition who was also credited with the introduction of a wide range of political and cultural forms from the continent to the Suiko court (COMO 2003). All of this thus suggests that the conjunction within the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* of immigrant scholar/ancestors and the introduction of horses to the Japanese islands may reflect not a hidden military conquest, but rather the degree to which the conceptual and material transformations of the sixth century were related (FARRIS 1998, 122; EDWARDS 1983).

By the reign of Suiko 推古 (reigned 592–628) immigrant lineages such as the Tanabe, Hata, Kawachi no Aya, and Yamato no Aya occupied important positions at court. This latter group in particular prospered in conjunction with their patrons the Soga, the dominant kinship group of the period and strong proponents of continental political and cultic structures. In addition to the transmission of a wide number of technologies such as writing, metal-working, and weaving, these immigrant lineages were also closely associated with the raising and training of horses.

One area of particular note in this regard was the Karu no Sakagami Umayā 輕坂上厩 (The Horse Stable of the Upper Karu Slope). Located in close proximity to the Karu crossroads, this area was purportedly settled by Ajiki 阿直岐, the founding ancestor of the Yamato no Aya, who is said to have presented Ōjin with horses upon his arrival from the Korean peninsula (NSK Ōjin 15.8). One indication of the close association of such lineages and their patrons, the Soga, with horses and with the advent of new technologies such as metal-working can be seen in the following passage from the *Nihon shoki*, in which Suiko is shown toasting her uncle Soga no Umako:

Oh Soga!
Children of the Soga!
If you were horses,

You would be the colts of Himuka!
 If you were swords,
 You would be swords of Kure!
 Even more are you,
 Children of the Soga,
 Servants of your Lord! (NSK Suiko 20.1.7)⁵

In addition to their considerable influence over the formation of the conceptual pillars of the Japanese royal system, the Hata, Yamato no Aya, and Kawachi no Aya also played a major role in the formation and dissemination of the Buddhist tradition within the Japanese islands. Among the many temples constructed by these lineages were Yachūji 野中寺, an early center of the Shōtoku cult that was also located in extremely close proximity to Ōjin's tomb, and Kōryūji 広隆寺, another Shōtoku temple with apparent ties to the Hata and the Korean kingdom of Silla (NSK Suiko 30.7, TAMURA 1983, 4: 176).

The Soga and immigrant lineages such as the Yamato no Aya were also closely involved with one further revolution in the material and political culture of the age. With the introduction of cavalry, horse-owning rulers found it easier to extend their authority over increasingly greater distances. By the end of the seventh century the court was requiring retainers across the Japanese islands to provide horses to the court. This almost certainly both reflected and spurred a burst of road building that probably dates as far back as the Suiko court (SENDA 1996). Increased travel over the roadways of Japan, however, in turn led to greater contact with formerly distant regions and their gods. New roadways and increased contact between regions also meant diseases could travel faster over wider distances. As a result, the court found itself for much of the seventh and eighth century bumping up against hostile deities that had previously been content to tend to matters in regions far away.⁶ Angry spirits and disease deities (*ekijin* 疫神), in turn, were assumed to bring diseases in their wake.

One result of this process was that disease-bearing demons came to be closely associated with the horses that traveled the roadways of Japan. Thus even before the advent of the Nara period the court frequently undertook rites at crossroads in order to pacify or propitiate hostile spirits that were believed to bring disease. As a result, roadside rites of spirit propitiation came to pervade cultic practice in the Japanese islands during the seventh and eighth centuries (WADA 1995, 2: 335–54). One of the most important rites in the court's liturgical calendar, the

5. Although the editors of the SNKBZ edition of the NSK are at a loss to explain the significance of horses from Himuka province in Kyushu, I would suggest that the term "horses of Himuka" might in fact refer to an area near the Umayasaka. Kidder notes in passing that this area of Yamato contained a temple from the late seventh century named "Nikkō-ji" ("Himuka-dera"). See KIDDER 1999, 23.

6. For the classic analysis of the importance of disease within virtually every element of life in the Japanese islands from the Asuka through early Heian periods, see FARRIS 1985, esp. 18–73.

Rite of Roadside Offerings, involved making offerings of horse hides at *chimata* 衢, or major intersections in roadways across the Japanese islands.

The belief that disease-causing spirits traveled along the roadways on horseback thus helped fuel an explosion of ritual activity at *chimata* that utilized human scapegoat figures known as *hitogata* 人形 as well as clay figurines of horses and other animals. By the end of the seventh century horses were being sacrificed to disease-bearing spirits in the hopes that the sacrificed animals would be used by their superhuman riders to travel far away. One example of this practice can be seen in the following liturgy for the expulsion of violent deities (*Tataru kami o utsusiyaru* 遷却崇神):

With this prayer I present offerings,
 Providing garments of colored cloth, radiant cloth,
 plain cloth, and coarse cloth,
 A mirror as something to see clearly with,
 A jewel as something to play with,
 A bow and arrow as something to shoot with,
 A sword as something to cut with,
 A horse as something to ride on... (italics added)

Praying that the Sovereign Deities
 Will with a pure hear receive them tranquilly
 As offerings of ease,
 As offerings of abundance,
 And will not seek vengeance and not ravage,
 But will move to a place of wide and lovely mountains and rivers,
 And will as deities dwell there be pacified...⁷

By the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki* in 720, such rites were firmly established within the cultic vocabulary of the court. Evidence for this can be seen in the text's depiction of the court's reception of visitors from the Sui dynasty in China during Suiko's reign. The text states that the visitors were met at the Tsubakichi 海石榴市 *chimata* near the court by an emissary from the court named Nukatabe no Muraji Hirafu 額田部連比羅夫 along with over seventy-five officials mounted on horses which were adorned in proper Chinese-style ritual ornaments (NSK Suiko 16.8). Even more importantly, Maeda notes that the text also states that the rite was preceded two days earlier by a rite of "opening" the road so that spirits from the outside would be allowed to enter

7. The translation is from PHILLIPI 1990, 70. For the original text, see AOKI 1978, 64–66. By the end of the seventh century horses had also become an essential part of rites of spirit pacification at local cultic centers such as the Lower Kamo Shrine in the Kadono district of Yamashiro province. According to the *Yamashiro fudoki* 山背城風土記, horse races and arrows were used at the annual Kamo Matsuri in order to propitiate the volatile Tamayori no Hiko, who in ages past was said to have caused an epidemic in the region. The text may be found in SNKBT 2, 415–16.

the area near the court (MAEDA 1996, 213–15). Even if we assume that such passages are later inventions of the editors of the *Nihon shoki*, such passages are of immediate note because (a) they are further evidence indicating that Nara court understood the link between horses and Chinese court ritual, (b) they show that by 720 at the latest the court not only conceived of spirits as travelers along the roadways of the Japanese islands, it also directly associated spirits from distant lands with danger and disease, and (c) the Nukadabe, like the Yamato no Aya and Hata, are also known to have been early devotees of the Shōtoku cult.⁸

Ancestors and Threats from Across the Sea

Further evidence that horses, disease, and the Korean peninsula were linked in the cultic imagination of the court can be seen in the *Nihon shoki*'s depiction of a series of incidents that rocked the Yamato court during the seventh and eighth centuries. When the Korean kingdom of Silla destroyed its rival Paekche 百濟 in 663, a new age of profound insecurity rocked the Yamato court and provided powerful impetus for increased centralization of political power and the institution of continental forms of government. Because Ōjin and Jingū were believed to have conquered Silla, in periods of heightened tensions with Silla the court turned to these ancestors for superhuman assistance (ŌHASHI 1984, 87–107).

Adding to this sense of insecurity was the vulnerability of even rulers to diseases from distant realms. This was most dramatically illustrated in 661 when the ruler Saimei 齋明 died suddenly at the Asakura Palace 朝倉宮 in Chikuzen 筑前 in preparation for an invasion of Silla:

5th month, 9th day. The *tennō* moved her residence to the Palace of Asakura no Tachibana no Hironiwa.

At this time trees belonging to the Shrine of Asakura were cut down and cleared away in order to build this palace. The god there was thus very angry and demolished the building. Within the Palace there were also mysterious fires. Because of this the Grand Treasurer and many of those in waiting took ill and died...

6th Month. Prince Ise died.

Autumn, 7th month, 24th day. The *tennō* died in the palace of Asakura...

8th month, 1st day. The Crown Prince, waiting in attendance with the *tennō*'s remains, went back to the Palace of Iwase. That evening, on the top of Mount Asakura, there was a demon wearing a great hat who looked down on the funeral ceremonies. The people all uttered exclamations of astonishment.

(NSK Saimei 7.5.9, 7.7.24, and 7.8.1)

Although it is possible that the text's suggestion that Saimei's death was related to a "demon wearing a great hat" was simply a literary invention, there is

8. For the Nukatabe, see ŌHASHI 1996, 163–81 and INOUE Hideo 1988.

ample reason to believe that the court took the possibility of hostile spirits striking down rulers very seriously. The final illness of Saimei's son Tenmu 天武, for instance, was attributed due to the wrath of the deity of the Atsuta 熱田 Shrine in Owari 尾張 province (NSK Shuchō 1.6.10).

Perhaps even more to the point, the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* also state that Ōjin's father, the Yamato ruler Chūai 仲哀, was also struck down in this region by the wrathful Sumiyoshi 住吉 deities. Ironically, the source of the gods' anger was Chūai's refusal to attack Silla:

At this the Queen Consort was possessed by gods who revealed to them the following command: "In the west there is a land of many rare and dazzling treasures beginning with gold and silver. I will now bestow it upon you." Then the *tennō* [Chūai] replied, saying: "When I climb up to a high place and look westward, I see no land, but only the great sea." Then, saying "They are lying deities," he pushed away his zither [*koto*], ceased playing it, and sat silently. At this the gods were very angry and said: "You should not rule this land! Go to the one road!"... Then [Chūai] slowly took back his zither and played on it listlessly. Almost immediately the sound of the zither became inaudible. When they then held up a light and looked, he was already dead.

(*Kojiki* Chūai, part 2)

Because the legend continues that Jingū obeyed the commands of the Suminoe deities and thereby conquered the Korean peninsula, this legend was for years read as part of a triumphalist nationalist discourse that asserted Japan's god-given right to primacy over the Korean peninsula.

Yet along with the god's assertion that they would give domain over the Korean kingdoms to Chūai's son Ōjin, this text frankly illustrates the ease with which such deities were believed to kill Yamato rulers. The full significance of this becomes apparent once we consider the nature of the Suminoe deities within the context of disease, dragons, and kingship during the period:

A figure riding a dragon appeared in the air. Its appearance resembled a foreigner [Chinese]. It wore a green lacquered hat, and flew from Kazuraki Peak to Mount Ikoma, where it hid. In the hour of the horse, it arrived at the Pine Peak of Suminoe. From there it then flew to the west. (NSK Saimei 1.5.1)⁹

When read against the legends of the deaths of Saimei and Chūai, this legend in many ways helps make explicit the various cultic and political registers that were affected by the profusion of horses and equestrian culture in the Japanese

9. There is no doubt that the "figure" riding the dragon here is a deity from the Sumiyoshi shrine. This is explicitly stated in the *Sumiyoshi Taisha jindaiki* 住吉大社神代記, a mid-ninth-century text recounting the shrine's legend corpus. Note also that the reference to the figure flying to the "west" is a clear indication that it was returning to either China or the Korean peninsula. A complete, annotated edition of the text may be found in TANAKA 1986.

islands. Here, crucially, we are told that the deity that killed Chūai was not only, like Ōjin, seen riding a dragon horse, it also had the appearance of someone from the continent. We are also told that the deity eventually flew away to the West; that is, in the direction of the Korean peninsula. This, coupled with the fact that the demon that killed Saimei was also known for wearing a continental-style broad hat, strongly suggests that the court associated deities from the continent not only with disease, but also with dragons and horses. It also suggests that a powerful motivation for the court's desire to propitiate such deities was simple fear.

Legends such as these thus suggest that the fear of disease may have been a major engine for the development of much of the royal cult. Although today we would say that Saimei's sudden illness and death were most likely caused by her exposure to microbes from a distant land, given the horizon of reception for this historical reality it is perhaps not surprising that such events were seen in terms of conflict with both humans and spirits from the Korean peninsula. Thus while legends such as this may provide us with little insight into specific historical events, they most likely do reflect real and immediate fears of rulers during the period. They also illustrate how horses could at once be a major pillar of the Yamato court's power and a source of profound cultic insecurities.

Horse Riding Spirits as Divine Protectors

In addition to figures such as Ōjin and Jingū, perhaps the greatest embodiment of this dynamic of power linked to cultic insecurity was one Prince Umayado 厩戸, a figure who had passed from history to legend even before the advent of the Nara period. Known to later generations by the more august sounding name "Shōtoku," this prince was credited both with the creation of new systems of court ranks, a national history, a constitution, and the promotion of continental forms of learning. Most famously, he was also credited with the victory of the pro-Buddhist forces in the battle for the establishment of Buddhism in Japan and the subsequent construction of numerous temples across central Japan.

Although very little is known for certain about the historical Prince Umayado, both his Soga roots and his name strongly suggest his association with horses. Much as the leader of the Soga during the period was named Soga no Umako 馬子 (literally: "Horse Child"), so too does the Prince's historical name—Prince Umayado, or "Horse Stable Door"—apparently reflect Umayado's connections with horse-raising lineages such as the Yamato no Aya at the Karu Sakagami Umay. Since this region was heavily populated by members of the Yamato no Aya, the fact that Umayado was of Soga descent suggests that these groups may have been associated with his upbringing. Umayado's connections with this region are also emphasized in the names of offspring, such as his daughter known as "Umayado Hime."

By the time of the composition of the *Nihon shoki*, Umayado's associations with the Yamato no Aya and (horse raising) continental culture had become basic elements in the identity of the legendary figure of Shōtoku. Thus his birth narrative:

He was the second son of Tachibana no Toyohi 橘豊日天皇 [Yōmei 用明] *tennō*. His mother the Empress was called Anahobe no Hashihito no Himeko 穴穂部間人皇女. When the Empress was near the time of delivery, she took a tour of the inner Palace grounds, looking at the posts of various officials. When she came to the horse station, she suddenly gave birth painlessly at the door of the stables... (NSK Suiko 1.4.10)

Over time, as the figure of Shōtoku assumed an increasingly legendary cast, Shōtoku's associations with continental culture and roadside rites of spirit propitiation also continued to grow. Within the *Nihon shoki* he is depicted helping a sage beggar achieve resurrection and immortality at a *chimata* on the Great Lateral Highway. By the Nara period temples claiming to have been founded by the prince propagated legends of his ability to foretell the future and even his superhuman powers as a *hijiri* 聖 capable of flying and seeing past and future lives (IIDA 2000, 301–26, WANG 1994).

By the advent of the court of Shōmu 聖武 (reigned 724–729) the figure of Shōtoku was seen as a protective deity that could protect the court from disease-causing spirits. This was most dramatically illustrated in 730's when plagues originating in Chikuzen devastated the area around the capital and killed as much as a third of the population, including the heads of all four sub-lineages of the powerful Fujiwara kinship group. In the midst of this epidemic, Queen Consort Kōmyō 光明皇后, the de facto standard bearer for the Fujiwara, turned to the spirit of Shōtoku for protection from both human and superhuman enemies that were pressing in around her. In 737 the Fujiwara began work on the restoration of the Yumedono, the de facto mausoleum of Shōtoku within Umayado's kinship group temple Hōryūji 法隆寺. According to the *Hōryūji tōin engi* 法隆寺東院緣起, a Heian-period text that cites Nara period documents related to the temple, shortly thereafter Kōmyō and the court petitioned the spirit of Shōtoku for protection from disasters that were befalling the court (DNBZ 85: 127–29, ŌYAMA 1998, 278–84, TŌNO 1997).

In many ways the decimation of the Fujiwara leadership and the court's subsequent ritual response illustrated a fundamental dynamic of the period. As both revenues and epidemics flowed from distant regions such as Chikuzen towards the court, the court's ritual focus shifted towards cultic issues related to disease. By the end of the Nara period edicts from the court regularly warned the populace that disease deities were roaming the land and needed propitiation (SNG Hōki 1.6.23, 2.3.5, 6.6.22, and 6.8.22). As a result, the court increasingly

turned to royal ancestors such as Shōtoku and Ōjin for assistance even as it developed a ritual calendar that required frequent roadside rites of propitiation.

These trends received fresh impetus when the court left the Nara plain in favor of the newly-built Heian capital in the main Hata base in the Kadano district of Yamashiro province. As epidemics swept through the capital throughout the early decades of the Heian period, the court increasingly turned to local cultic centers in Yamashiro province for protection from the spirits and diseases that were believed to wreak such destruction upon the living. In light of the fact that the cultic terrain of Kadono 葛野 was strongly influenced by immigrant lineages such as the Hata, it is perhaps not surprising that by the advent of the Heian period, demons, deities, and royal ancestors had come to be portrayed on horseback across the Japanese islands. As the court came to rely upon local cultic centers for protection, deities that were identified with dragon horses (*ryūma*), entered in the mainstream of the royal cult.

One such figure was the god Mutō no kami 武塔神, a deity with clear roots in the Korean peninsula who was said to have come to the Japanese islands in order to marry the daughter of the dragon king. The nature of this god's cult can be seen from a legend from the *Bingo fudoki* 備後風土記, a court gazetteer composed sometime around 713. According to the text, on his way to wed the daughter of the dragon king, Mutō no kami stopped in Bingo province and asked for a night's shelter from two brothers. Although the rich elder brother refused the deity, the younger brother named Sōmin Shōrai 蘇民将来 took him in and treated him graciously. Later, while returning from his wedding, the god is said to have instructed Sōmin Shōrai to inform his descendants of the ritual means to avoid epidemics (SNKBT 2: 488–89).

By the early Heian period Mutō no kami had taken up residence in the Yasaka Shrine 八坂神社, where he was identified alternately as either the Ox-headed disease deity Gozu Ten'ō 牛頭天王 or as Gozu Ten'ō's son. Gozu Ten'ō, in turn, is notable because a) his cult has clear origins in the Korean peninsula, b) he is known to have been worshipped by the Hata in Kadono, and c) archeological finds from the advent of the Nara period show that by that time he was already depicted as a horse riding deity (KANeko 1999, 174–75). By the time the court officially embraced the Yasaka Shrine in 876, Gozu Ten'ō and Mutō Tenjin were at the center of the well-known Gion Matsuri 祇園祭, one of the largest festivals for the pacification of disease-causing spirits in the Japanese islands. Thereafter the Gion cult was a major pillar in the court's attempts to keep the capital free of epidemics (McMULLEN 1988).

The Gion cult is of particular note for our purposes because it demonstrates how deities from the Korean peninsula that were closely associated with the advent of disease could enter the mainstream of the royal cult. As contact with the Korean peninsula was almost certainly responsible for at least some of the many plagues that swept the Japanese islands during the period, the court's

actions most likely reflected large doses of both prudence and fear. They also illustrate the court's belief that, if propitiated properly, such deities could be turned from agents of disease and death to guardians against disease.

Another deity depicted on horseback during this period was the moon god Tsukiyomi no Mikoto 月読尊. This deity, like Gozu Ten'ō and Mutō Tenjin, was worshipped by the Hata in a shrine in the Kadono district of Yamashiro province. He appears in two separate legends within the *Nihon shoki*, one of which depicts him as coming to the Japanese islands from the Korean kingdom of Mimana 任那, while the other shows him slaying a goddess in a fit of rage (NSK Kenzō 3.2; NSK Age of the Gods). One of only a handful of kami in Japan who are known to have been represented iconographically during the Nara period, the *Kōtai jingū gishiki chō* 皇太神宮儀式帳, an early-ninth-century text, states that he was depicted wearing a headband, riding a horse (GR 1: 15).

Although it is impossible to know when and how the moon god Tsukiyomi no Mikoto was transformed into a horse-riding deity, it is clear that he was but one of a number of gods affiliated with the Korean peninsula and immigrant lineages such as the Hata to be reinvented in this way. Perhaps the most powerful example of the influence of immigrant lineages such as the Hata on the royal cult, however, can be seen in the following legend from the *Jōgū Shōtoku Taishi den hoketsuki* 上宮聖德太子伝補闕記, an early Heian-period text that was composed using sources from the Hata and other lineages associated with the Prince's cult:

The Crown Prince had a horse with dapple black hair. When the Prince rode him, the horse would soar up to the sky and race among the clouds. He could stretch his four legs, ascend to the top of Mount Fuji 輔時岳 in the east and return in three days. He could go to Kōshi 高志 province and return in two days. There was no place that the Prince wanted to see that the horse could not run to in three, four, five, or six days. The Prince said to all of the lords "How proud I am of this horse! How wonderful! How wonderful he is!"... On the twenty-second day of the twelfth month of the year kanoto no tsuchinoto 辛巳, [the horse] died. The Prince grieved over this and built a tomb and buried the horse in it. It is now the great tomb on the south side of Chūgūji 中宮寺 temple. (STZ 3: 59)

When read against the ancestral legends of the Hata, Kawachi no Aya, and other immigrant lineages at the forefront of the early Shōtoku cult, this text appears concerned to underscore the depth of the Prince's connections with the horse culture of the continent. The depth of these associations—and the legend's significance—becomes clear once we consider the legend's relationship to other legends of horses, disease deities, and the Korean peninsula.

To see the closeness of these links, consider the following chart of horse riding deities from Nara and early Heian-period literature:

Horse Riding Deities and the Korean Peninsula

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Mutō no kami/Gozū Tenō | Arrives from across Sea, <i>ekijin</i> ,
Son-in-law of the Dragon King. |
| 2. Tsukiyomi no Mikoto | Arrives from Mimana, horse rider.
Slays deity Ukemochi no kami. |
| 3. Ōjin | Born upon mother's return from Silla.
Spirit rides clay horse.
Protects court from Silla. |
| 4. Suminoe Deity | "Chinese in appearance." Slays Chūai.
Flies off to "West." |
| 5. Shōtoku (Prince Stable Door) | Born in front of stable, protector of court.
Rides dragon horse. |

Although at first glance legends such as Shōtoku's riding a flying horse may appear as a fanciful exaltation of a royal ancestor, a closer examination suggests that the above text may have been produced not in a milieu of self-assurance but rather profound insecurity. By the advent of the Heian period Shōtoku had long been venerated by the court as a guardian figure capable of preventing the advent of epidemics, such as the one that decimated the leaders of the Fujiwara during Shōmu's reign. As horse-riding deities such as Gozu Tenō and Mutō Tenjin came to occupy increasingly important positions in the court's cultic defenses against disease, so too did the guardian figure of Shōtoku come to be represented as yet another horse rider who could keep at bay renegade spirits from afar. In light of the fact that all of the figures on the above list were closely linked with immigrant lineages such as the Hata, the Kawachi no Aya, and the Yamato no Aya, it would appear that the figure of Shōtoku was emblematic of a much broader trend that occurred within cultic practice in the Japanese islands.

All of this thus suggests that as the court turned to immigrant lineages and their horse-riding deities for protection from the ravages of horse-riding *ekijin*, even royal ancestors such as Shōtoku came to be conceived as horse riders. It would also appear that even during the Heian period the court was producing and elaborating new legends of horse-riding ancestors as part of its search for a cultic defense. Ironically, the very forces that made these figures so necessary to the court were also the same forces that made possible the far-flung bureaucracy over which the *tennō* and his court reigned. Just as the volatile *ekijin* could at one moment be disease-causing demons and the next disease-preventing gods, so too were horses and the broader conceptual system that they represented double-edged in the extreme.

Conclusion

As Egami Namio pointed out several decades ago, the introduction of horses into the Japanese islands sometime in the fourth century CE was an epochal

moment in the formation of Japanese culture. In contrast to Egami's hypothesis that this process was the result of conquest by horse-riding invaders from the Korean peninsula, this essay has suggested that these transformations were to a surprising degree the result of the role played by horses in the political and cultic discourses of the period.

Central to this alternative view is the premise that horses not only transformed the way wars were fought, they also made possible a dramatic expansion and transformation of the authority of Yamato rulers. As the Yamato court built roadways with the aim of bringing distant regions into the Yamato orbit, several unforeseen political and cultic consequences helped give birth to the political and religious paradigms that would later come to be associated with "native" Japan. The importation of horses and technologies from the continent not only facilitated the expansion of centralized power across the Japanese islands, it also led to the proliferation of continental models of kingship. These models in turn were part of an elaborate ritual and cosmological conceptual apparatus that emphasized the workings of *yin* and *yang* and the power of rulers/humans to affect the cosmos through a principal of cosmic resonance.

As horses facilitated the arrival of people and goods in Yamato from increasingly distant regions, however, they also facilitated the transmission of new diseases. The court soon had reason to fear hostile deities and disease-causing demons, as at least two rulers during the final decades of the seventh century were cut down by diseases that were attributed to the wrath of vengeful spirits. Thus even as horses from the continent helped strengthen the position of rulers, they also brought them into contact with a host of forces that rulers could not well control. Even prior to the advent of the Nara period horses, horse hides, and horse figurines had become requisite offerings for horse riding agents of plague. By the end of the Nara period such offerings were made across the Japanese islands in the hopes of ridding the land of impurities and the disease-bearing demons that accompanied them.

By the advent of the Nara period legends of horses, or flying "dragon-horses" had also entered the mythic vocabulary in terms of which rulers and royal ancestors were constructed. One such figure was the semi-historical ruler Ōjin, who was depicted riding a miraculously animate horse figurine near the precincts of his tomb. Yet another figure in this process was one Prince Umayado (Prince Stable Door), the figure known to later generations as Prince Shōtoku, who was most closely associated with the cultural transformation of the seventh century. Although little can be known for sure about this prince, it is clear that he and his lineage were closely associated with immigrant lineages that were in turn actively involved in not only raising horses but also building the roads, temples, and bureaucratic structures that made the Nara court possible. By the Heian period Prince Shōtoku was not only hailed as a sage, he was also depicted riding a dragon-horse across the Japanese islands even to the heights of Mount Fuji.

The depiction of royal ancestors as horse-riding deities most likely reflects a broader pattern within the royal cult of propitiating immigrant horse riding spirits across the Japanese islands. As the court took up residence in the Hata stronghold of Kadono in Yamashiro province, it embraced such horse-riding deities such as Mutō no kami, Gozu Ten'ō, Tsukiyomi no Mikoto and the Sumiyoshi Daimyōjin in the hopes that such guardian spirits could ward off disease. By the early Heian period, the court was depicting royal ancestors such as Shōtoku and Ōjin as horse riders whose spirits roamed the land and kept the agents of plague at bay.

It would thus appear that legends of horses and horse riders were rooted not in distant memories of conquest, but rather in powerfully-felt fears of the present. Ironically, the very horses and road networks that made possible the expansion of Yamato power had also set in motion a host of demons, gods, and ancestors across the land. The diseases attributed to these spirits were eminently real and manifestly deadly. As a result, the dread and worship that these mounted figures inspired remained a central part of the political and cultic landscape of the Japanese islands for centuries to come.

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- NSK *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, ed. Kojima Noriyuki 小島憲之, 3 vols. In SNKBZ 2–4.
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