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## **Dawn of Japan: Emperor Jimmu with his gods and warriors on third-century bronze mirrors**

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## Introduction

The seven narrative bronze mirrors of ancient Japan that make up the Sea-Dance genre will, if properly studied, greatly widen our view of early Japanese history, art, and religion. Among them stands out the so-called *Shuryō-mon-kyō* (Hunting-Pattern Mirror), here called *Jimmu's Mirror*, the richest and most striking of all ancient Japanese bronze mirrors, the main subject of our study.

Housed in the Tokyo National Museum, Jimmu's Mirror, as a masterpiece of Japanese art<sup>1</sup>, is often pictured and has always appealed to lovers of ancient Japan. The reliefs on its back show fourteen lively, arm-swinging dancers that are the largest human figures found on any mirror in Japan. New, however, and argued here, is that these figures represent well-known heroes of the ancient legend. Their identification as set forth in the following will bring back to life the Mirror's epic and mythic sweep.

### A RIDDLING MIRROR

The four deer among the dancers have led scholars to think of Jimmu's Mirror as portraying a hunting scene or ritual<sup>2</sup>. Yet it depicts no hunting. The deer stand quietly between the dancers and are not fleeing, as they would if they were hunted. They thus belie the Mirror's conventional name *Shuryō-mon-kyō*, 'Hunting-Pattern Mirror'. Those who have seen here a war dance rather than a hunting scene were undoubtedly right<sup>3</sup>, for not only do the dancers brandish weapons of war, but in ancient Japan deer were a part of cultic dances (below, figs. 44 and 45).

If the Mirror depicts a war dance, then who are these warriors, and which war do they fight? Those in the outer band are dancing in high feather, while those in the inner band are throwing their weapons down and running away. As it belongs to a group of mirrors decorated with human figures, the Mirror dates to the years around 250–350 of our era<sup>4</sup>, and victories celebrated then in Japan are very likely those of the Yamato rulers who just then established their

long-lasting sway<sup>5</sup>. The dancers on the Mirror's outer band thus seem to be Yamato warriors, while those on the inner band are their foes. Bringing so many, and so widely differing warriors together, the Mirror is likely to have a weighty story to tell<sup>6</sup>. Could it be Japan's oldest and foremost war tale, Jimmu's legendary Eastern conquest as recorded in the eighth-century *Kojiki*, *Kujiki*, and *Nihon shoki*<sup>7</sup>?

<sup>1</sup> The most recent publication is Kurumazaki 2002, 53. The Mirror is said to be from the mound at Yawatabara in the Takasaki City area, Gumma Prefecture, yet reliable archaeological context is lacking (Takahashi 1915, 338; Gōda 1991, 74; Umezawa 2003, 6). By 1914 it had found a place in the Emperors' household collection.

<sup>2</sup> Most decidedly so Naora Nobuo, who stated: 'This is the best example of an ancient group hunt . . . The men of the outer circle are beaters who drove the deer into the fence and surrounded them. One of them, without a weapon and raising his hands, is their leader. The four men of the inner circle do the real hunting' (after Gōda 1991, 72). Hunt: Hosaka 1957, 99; Okada 1965, 376; Saitō 1965; Kidder 1964, 56f.; 1966, 171 and 187 (doubtfully); Ueda 1973, 125; Tanaka 1977, no. 139 (doubtfully); Tokyo National Museum website 2009: all following Takahashi 1915, 342f. Hunting ritual: Gōda 1991. Alternatively, a shaman's agricultural ceremony (Sahara / Harunari 1997, 104), spirits of ancestors, or a simulated war: Ōtsuka et al. 2000 (alternative opinions to pl. 13); or a dance at a festival: Saitō 1965 359–362; or a celebration of harvest fertility: Shitara 1991; Umezawa 2003, 7. The most thorough study, so far, is that of Gōda 1991 (with a discussion of earlier literature, not repeated here), who argues that because of their feather badges the dancers are *shin jin* priests.

<sup>3</sup> A war scene or war dance: Kobayashi 1965, 99f.; Higuchi 1979, 370; Gotō (referred to by Kanaseki 1991, 189); Sahara / Inokuma 1990, 152; Ōtsuka et al., 2000, pl. 13 (caption): 'Armed warriors with shields, swords, and spears, led by a shaman who does not have a weapon'.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, convincingly, Akatsuka 1995; 2000, 71 and 78; 2005: *Jimbutsu-kaiga-mon-kyō*. Kusaka / Kaneda 1970, 134: Early Kofun period. Ōtsuka et al. 2000, pl. 13, suggest a fourth-century date, Sahara / Harunari 1997, 20: fourth-century, Early Kofun period.

<sup>5</sup> Brown 1993; Shiraishi 1999; Barnes 2007; Kidder 2007. Celebrating a victory: Sahara / Inokuma 1990, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Thus Tsuboi Kiyotari in Kanda 1978, 98.

<sup>7</sup> The *Kojiki* ('Record of Ancient Matters') completed in 712 C. E.; the *Nihon shoki* ('Chronicles of Japan'), com-

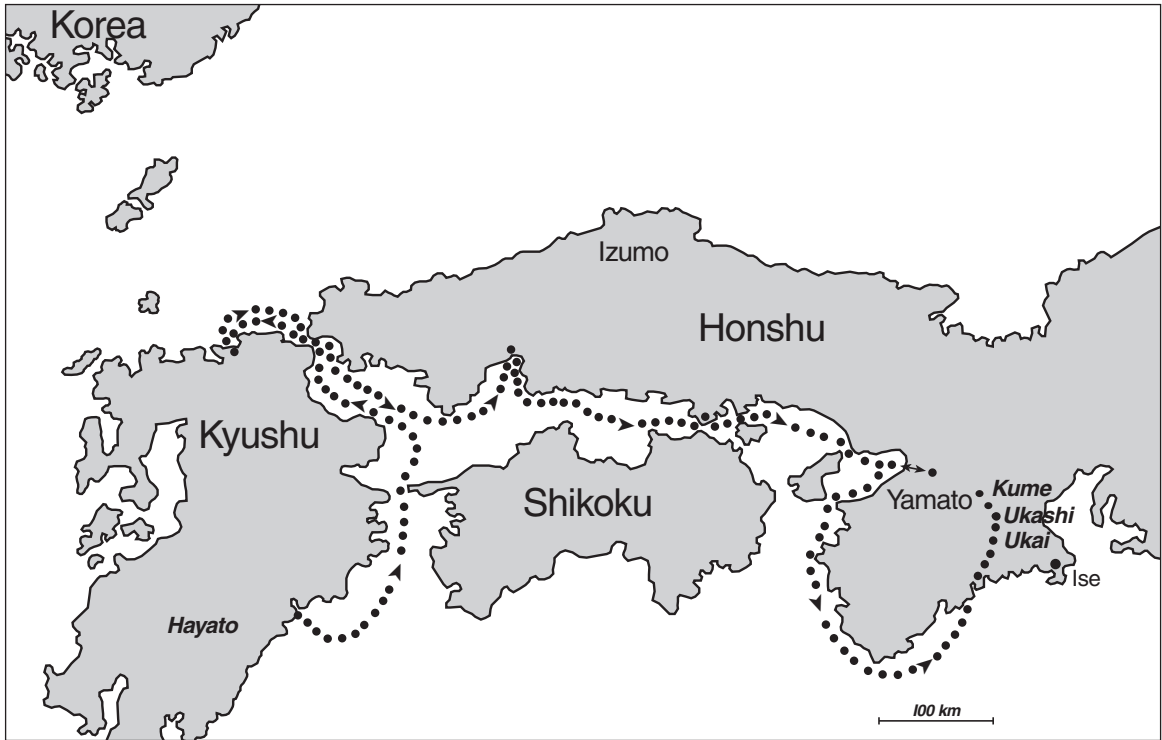


Fig. 1. Jimmu, gathering allies during the advance on Yamato.

#### COMPARING THE MIRROR WITH THE LEGEND

Though the gap of over four hundred years between the Mirror and the written legend calls for great caution, thorough research leads one to the conclusion that the scenes on the Mirror indeed match the legend of Jimmu's Eastern conquest. Both in the overall sequence of events and in astoundingly many details the Mirror reflects the legend so well that whoever impartially studies the color plates offered here may reach the same conclusion. Nevertheless, a comparison of the Mirror with the legend, low-key and technical though it may be, is fraught with far-reaching consequences, for as a contemporary record from the time of the foundation of Japan, the Mirror raises the question of the historical truth of these events.

According to the legend, Emperor Jimmu, the founder of Japan, first ruled in southeast Kyushu from where he set out on a seaborne expedition and, over the course of several years, conquered Yamato in the middle of the islands. There he founded the country that became Japan and established its lasting dynasty. The first indication that the Mirror tells the same story comes from a passage in the *Kojiki* that says

Jimmu's troops prevailed by dancing<sup>8</sup>. Though war dancing is the very heart of archaic fighting ecstasy, worldwide as well as in Japan<sup>9</sup>, the written legend says of no other battle or campaign that it was won by dancing. In Jimmu's decisive battle, then, the dance greatly mattered, and, remarkably, the Mirror depicts a war dance that turns the enemies to flight.

Above all the Mirror's artist endowed the dancers with telltale signs to let viewers recognize them as individual heroes. Thus, among the ten dancers in the outer band of the Mirror, the first, Jimmu himself, is marked by his *wani* sea steed (fig. 3), while the next warrior, Itsuse, as in the legend has arrows shot in his shield (fig. 4). The sixth, the Ukai, has a cormorant (fig. 8); the seventh, the Ukashi, has a messenger bird (fig. 9), and the eighth, the Kume, wields

pleted in 720; the *Kujiki*, written perhaps a few years earlier: *Nihonshi Hikkei* 2006; Bentley 2006; Barnes 2007, 20ff.; Kidder, 2007, 2ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Kojiki*, Preface 14; NKBT 43, as quoted in the epigraph to our first chapter. It is not the battle Jimmu's men fought when listening to a song, see below, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Speidel 2004, 114ff.

a club (fig. 10), all of which is recorded in the legend in great detail.

Readers may want to verify these identifications on the color plates to see for themselves whether the match of the sixth, seventh, and eighth warriors with Jimmu's allies of the Ukai, Ukashi, and Kume is correct. They will find that it is and that the Mirror thus depicts the same tale as the legend.

The Mirror, moreover, lists Jimmu's allies in exactly the same sequence in which they appear in the *Kojiki*. Figure 1 shows this sequence to be geographically compelling, as it lays out the course of Jimmu's advance from the sea to Yamato.

The sequence of the allies' appearance on the Mirror fits the legend so well, it is hard to doubt that the Mirror depicts Jimmu's tale as told in the legend. We thus will call it 'Jimmu's Mirror'.

If more proof be needed that the Mirror depicts Jimmu's conquest of Yamato, the paintings and drawings in the Gorōyama and Takaida graves, discussed in the chapter on Kofun art, will supply it, independently of the above.

#### LEGEND AND HISTORY

If indeed the Mirror, cast no later than the mid-fourth century, tells the same tale as the legend,

one can hardly escape the conclusion that the legend was formed already in Jimmu's own time or shortly thereafter, and therefore truly reflects historical events. Over the years, several scholars have come close to taking Jimmu's legend seriously<sup>10</sup>. To take it as largely true, however, will come as a shock to historians who, by and large, tend to deny the legend and reject Jimmu as the founder of Japan.

Well aware that our findings are likely to meet with deep-seated disbelief, we state categorically that we did not seek this result, but that archaeological evidence lead us to it. We have taken pains to claim nothing outside the carefully limited way in which we present the evidence, and, mindful that work like this must not only be consistent in itself but also uncontradicted by facts outside its chosen path, we have been as circumspect as we could.

We also took heart from the fact that the myths and symbols we found on the Mirror and on related works of art are all well borne-out by worldwide archaic parallels such as those studied by Mircea Eliade.

We therefore ask readers to suspend disbelief until they have given the evidence a fair hearing. If so, the Mirror, set forth as a work of art and as a historical source, photographed, described, and put into a framework of Kofun art and legend, will yield some of its secrets and shed light on the dawn of Japan.

<sup>10</sup> There have always been scholars who considered parts of the legend historically true, such the legend's tales about the Kume warriors: Aston 1896, XVII; Uemura 1957; Naumann 1981, 104ff., reviewing much literature; Ōkubo 1981, 45ff.; Sakamoto 1991, 57. More recently: Yasumoto 1999 and 2005.

