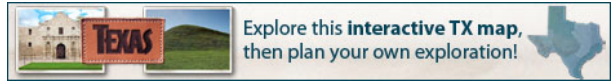




A publication of the Archaeological Institute of America



newsbriefs

Volume 51 Number 3, May/June 1998

Mirrors to Japanese History

by Walter Edwards

In perhaps their most important find of the decade, Japanese archaeologists have recovered 33 bronze mirrors from a third-century A.D. keyhole-shaped burial mound in the Yamato region in central Japan, stirring debate over a mysterious country called Yamatai and its enigmatic queen, Himiko. Known only from an early Chinese text, the *Wei Chih*, Yamatai is said to have controlled some 30 other countries making up the Japanese islands in the mid-third century A.D. Its ruler Himiko sent gifts to the court of the Chinese Wei Dynasty (220-256) in 239; return gifts included 100 bronze mirrors. The *Wei Chih* (compiled ca. 290) is considered one of the most reliable of the Chinese dynastic histories, but its record of this exchange leaves Yamatai's precise location ambiguous.

While the excavation of keyhole tombs has become common in postwar Japan (with the exception of a small number designated as belonging to the imperial line, see "Japan's New Past," March/April 1997), few third-century tombs have been found. The discovery of so many mirrors in an early keyhole tomb is thus a rare event. While this alone has fueled a media blitz in Japan, public interest in Yamatai has long been keen. All Japanese are aware of the debate over its location, which is covered in middle-school history courses. Moreover, Himiko is the oldest named Japanese historical figure, and press accounts have stressed the possibility that the newly discovered items are "Himiko's mirrors," part of the gift she received from the Wei court.

Japanese scholars have long sought to clarify Yamatai's location using archaeological evidence. One strong candidate is the southern island of Kyushu, where the largest concentration of Chinese mirrors from the Late Han period (A.D. 25-220) was unearthed. Some argue that the styles of these mirrors were still predominant at the time of the Japanese envoys' visit to the Wei court, and hence they made up the bulk of the Wei Dynasty's gift. The other major candidate is Yamato, on Honshu, home of the ancient Japanese state whose emergence is signaled by the construction of monumental keyhole tombs, which appeared there in the late third century and spread over most of the archipelago by the latter half of the fourth. In addition to Yamato's sounding like Yamatai, proponents of Yamato point to mirrors of a newer style that are frequent in early keyhole tombs and are occasionally inscribed with dates from the Wei dynastic calendar. Like the tombs themselves, these mirrors are concentrated in Yamato and the surrounding region. Yamato proponents also believe that distributing these mirrors, including those presumably received as the Wei court's gift, was a key factor in cementing political alliances.

The discovery of the "Wei-style" mirrors in the 425-foot-long tomb lends support to those who favor Yamato as Yamatai and see continuity between the foreign diplomatic exchanges of the mid-third century and the domestic process of alliance building which led to unification in the fourth. Found along three walls of a stone burial chamber, most of the mirrors were evidently placed outside a wooden coffin, which had disintegrated. The 27-foot-long chamber was undisturbed despite grave robbers' attempts to enter it. The chamber is among the largest known of early keyhole tombs. Other grave goods included weapons and armor, suggesting the tomb's occupant was a male warrior-aristocrat in the early Yamato polity.

The controversy is far from settled. Chinese archaeologists, while remaining aloof on the question of Yamatai's location, have shown great interest in the Wei mirrors. Although they are clearly linked stylistically to other Chinese mirrors, no similar examples have been recovered from China. This has prompted one prominent Chinese scholar to suggest that the Wei mirrors were made by Chinese artisans who had fled their homeland for asylum in Japan, and thus could not be Himiko's mirrors at all—a claim most Japanese archaeologists are unwilling to accept.

© 1998 by the Archaeological Institute of America
www.archaeology.org/9805/newsbriefs/japan.html

Share Article

Archaeology.org e-Update!

Stay up-to-date on news and new features on our website. [Click here to sign up.](#)

Buy current & back issues:



See what's available!

CURRENT ISSUE

Special Introductory Offer
Renew Now | Give a Gift
Buy Current Issue | Back Issues

AIA TOURS

"The rich educational experience... was an experience of a lifetime."

Special Introductory Offer for New Subscribers!

Search

ONLINE CONTENT

Latest News
Daily archaeological headlines

Interactive Digs
Follow online as ancient civilizations are unearthed.

Privacy Policy - Contact Us - Advertise
© 2011 Archaeological Institute of America
Website by Castle Builder Design