

Where Was “Yamatai” Ruled by Mysterious Queen?

By Isao ADACHI

Himiko, the legendary queen of the elusive land of Yamatai, is a towering figure in the ancient history of Japan, her name etched in the mind of every Japanese. She is the Japanese equivalent of the Queen of Sheba who appears in the Old Testament. Himiko lived in the second to third centuries when the Roman Empire was about to fall in Europe and three dynasties in China – Wei, Wu and Shu – fought one another. The presence of Yamatai is mentioned in the “Book of Wei,” a part of the “Records of Three Kingdoms,” an authorized history book of China, but its exact whereabouts remains unknown in much the same way as the Kingdom of Sheba. In 2009, however, the remains of large-scale structures believed built in the third century were unearthed in Nara Prefecture, western Japan, where the Yamato Dynasty was built as the first administration that unified Japan. Excitement grew at the discovery as it seemed to suggest that the ruins might be those of Himiko’s palace. However, those scholars who insist that Yamatai was located not in Nara but somewhere in the westernmost main island of Kyushu closer to the Chinese continent struck back vigorously. The dispute over the major enigma in the ancient history has flared up again.

Before the Yamato Dynasty was established in the fourth century, a number of regional powers, called *kuni* (chiefdom), stood shoulder to shoulder on the Japanese archipelago. Some *kuni* had exchanges with China, then a powerful, most-advanced country. An account in the “Book of the Later Han,” a Chinese history book, holds that an emissary from the king of Na, one of the *kuni* constituting the state of Wa, or Japan, received a golden seal in 57 A.D. from Emperor Guangwu of the Later Han. Na was believed to be somewhere in northern Kyushu or, on today’s map, near Fukuoka City, close to the continent and the Korean Peninsula. In fact, the golden seal was unearthed in 1784 on an island off Fukuoka City. It is an eloquent testimony to the accuracy of Chinese history documents.

The “Records of Three Kingdoms” was compiled at the end of the third century. According to the “Book of Wei,” an association of about 30 *kuni* was formed in the aftermath of a great commotion in Wa, with Himiko of Yamatai crowned as their queen. Himiko was presumed to be something of a medicine woman esteemed as a holy shrine maiden. The Wa commotion was said to have subsided subsequently.

Himiko died around 248. It was 40 years after Wei’s army led by Cao Cao clashed against the allied forces of Wu and Shu led by warlords Sun Quan and Liu Bei, respectively, at the Red Cliffs on the southern bank of the Yangtze River in what was later known as the Battle of Red Cliffs, made famous by the Chinese movie “Red Cliff.” Later in history, Japanese people learned from accounts of the “Book of Wei” that Yamatai and Himiko did exist. The question that comes up next is where Yamatai was located. The presence of the ruling queen may have stirred even greater interest among people. Great debate has been waged since the Edo era (1603-1867) between two camps of scholars over the location of Yamatai



The three rows of yellow poles show the unearthed places of pillars believed to be those of a large ancient building. The discovery in Sakurai City, Nara Pref., has fueled speculation that the remains might be those of a palace belonging to Himiko, the legendary queen of the land of Yamatai, whose whereabouts remains elusive.

– one insisting on Nara in the middle of the Japanese archipelago while the other taking a firm stand in favor of Kyushu in western Japan. A decision is nowhere in sight.

The divide resulted from an account in the “Book of Wei” describing the way from China to Yamatai. As it goes, a party from China first went south by ship along the coast of the Korean Peninsula. The party then hopped islands in the straits separating the peninsula and Kyushu en route to northern Kyushu. The route is so natural up until here. The party had to travel through a number of *kuni* chiefdoms, which should have been of no concern to them because Na was one of them. After that, however, direction and distance used in the Chinese records are no longer compatible with the geographical features of Japan, leaving Yamatai in a haze of ancient history.

Nara Prefecture is about 500 km east of northern Kyushu. The cruise on the Seto Inland Sea, which connects Kyushu and Nara, might have been relatively easy. Nara nonetheless was far away from China and Korea back then. However, the ruins unearthed recently measure 12.4 meters east to west and 19.2 meters north to south, big enough to make up for Nara’s geographical disadvantage in terms of access from China as a Yamatai location compared with Kyushu. In the ruins’ vicinity, there is an ancient mound-shaped tomb involved in controversy among scholars concerning the time of construction. Radiocarbon dating of earthenware recently discovered in the tomb found the mound had been made between 240 and 260 A.D. If the determination is accurate, production of the earthenware coincides with the time when Himiko died, lending credence to speculation the tomb may possibly be hers.

The Yamato Dynasty, which appeared later, continued to stay in the Kansai region, moving the capital around in relatively small confines of land – from Asuka to Nara and then to Kyoto – with the “Sumera Mikoto” head-of-state title in ancient times leading up to the Emperor in modern times. The ancient capital sites, registered on the World Heritage list, are Japan’s cultural heritage. For about 150 years from the last half of the third century, Chinese history documents have no record of Wa. That adds another enigma to the already mysterious ancient history of Japan. A discovery of the golden seal that was also given to Himiko by an emperor of Wei will certainly put an end to the long-time mystery. **JS**

Isao Adachi is commentator, Jiji Press.