

# Across Two Millennia

## The First of Three Parts

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

Even the air seems ancient here. The evening breeze whispers across the nearby dormant rice paddies as the sun dips toward the low mountains that complicate the horizon, but its soft sibilance betrays nothing. I listen and watch as this day dies. It must have been like this when the original watchtowers loomed over the landscape, almost 2,000 years ago. Gradually it was all forgotten and the memories of the ancient times dried up and vanished. The place now called Yoshinogari became just another countryside name on maps of Saga Prefecture.

In the early 1980s, Yoshinogari was selected to be the site for a planned industrial park, and in accordance with Japan's Cultural Assets Preservation Law, the site was surveyed and test excavations made, largely because in the 1930s some stone artifacts and potsherds had been collected there. Ancient remains were found over a 36-hectare area; the planned development was canceled, and in 1986, excavation began in earnest. By mid-1989, almost 30 hectares had been excavated and results began to appear in the Japanese news media, where reports of domestic archeological discoveries are so common as to be almost routine. But what was revealed here mesmerized the nation.

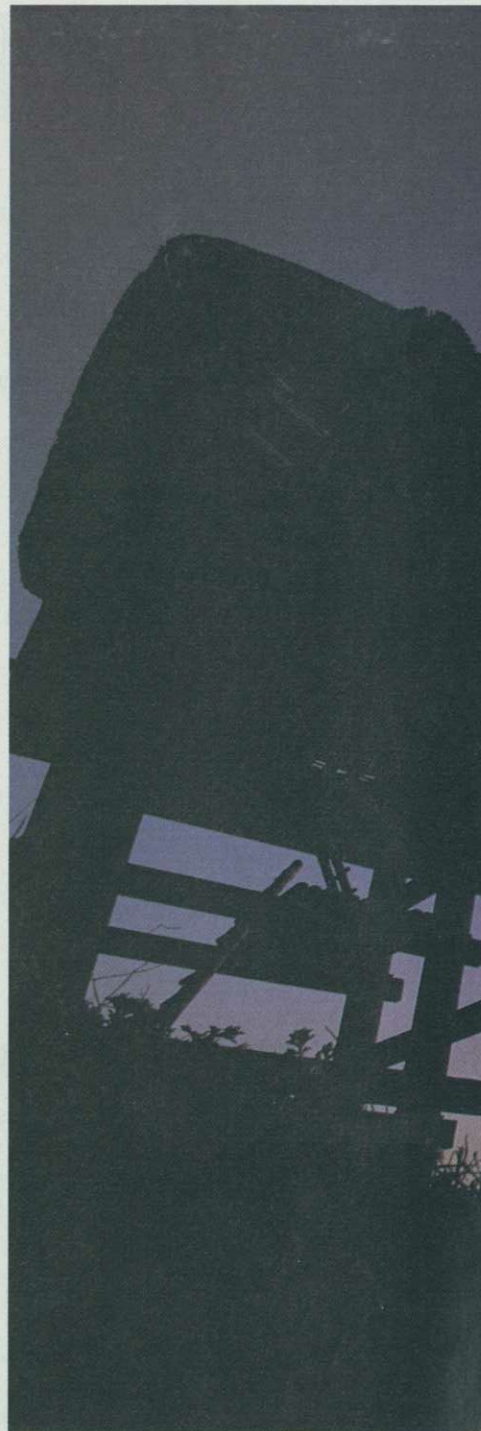
While recovered items ranged in age from the Paleolithic down to the late Japanese Middle Ages, the most impressive array dated from the Yayoi Period—a period of about 600 years, divided almost in half by the founding of the modern era. Over 2,000 individual burials were discovered, along with the remains of a fortified settlement. Never before had such a rich and extensive array from the Yayoi Period come to light. At no other site

had such complete fortifications been unearthed, and it was these—dated to the third century of the present era—that became the magnet for public interest, along with a burial tumulus that contained remains appearing to be those of an ancient ruling clan or family.

In third-century China, a 30-volume historical commentary called *The History of the Three Kingdoms* was compiled by court officials, and in it was a section titled "The History of the Kingdom of Wei"—in Chinese, *Wei Zhi*. One volume of the *Wei Zhi* was devoted to describing the semi-civilized peoples living on the periphery of the Chinese empire at the time; among these were the people of Wa, who lived on "mountainous islands in the middle of the ocean." The description and some of the place names leave no doubt that the islands of the Wa are those of the Japanese archipelago. The 1,987-character description relates that there were 30 to 40 "countries" in these islands, and describes the most preeminent one, the country of Yamatai, a name that is likely the source of—or a corruption of—the word Yamato, which is still used to refer to Japan. In its description of Yamatai, the *Wei Zhi* mentions a "palace" protected by stockades and watchtowers. Until the excavation of Yoshinogari, no remains of such structures had ever been found in the same place in Japan. Suddenly speculation was rife: had the ancient and undiscovered Yamatai at last been found? Was Yoshinogari the nucleus of what was to become Japan? ■

to be continued . . .

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