

# Across Two Millennia

**The Second of Three Parts**

*Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley*







The cold and shadowy room is stacked to the ceiling with boxes, all carefully labeled with cryptic codes. Most of them hold angular collections of potsherds, others hold fragments of wood or metal or stone. The research assistant carefully opens several boxes and gingerly places their contents before me.

The ancient sword blades are covered with a blue-green patina marbled with gray and brown. I examine them closely and become lost in their details. The short blades are beautifully angled and grooved, each with a graceful incurved area near the base and a ricasso—an unsharpened edge—between the curve and the hilt. They are exotic and reminiscent of weapons of the Bronze-Age Celts, although these are far separated in time and space. The hilt of one—unusual in that it is cast entirely in one piece—has a large and unwieldy crossbar jutting from its pommel; that argues strongly against it having been a functional weapon. Perhaps it was a badge of rank. Perhaps all these swords were such badges: the tangs are so short that it is difficult to see how they could be used in actual combat without soon being torn out of their hilts. I stare at them for a long time, trying to divine what unspoken stories they may hold.

Wondering what the ancient inhabitants of Yoshinogari might have traded for rare and expensive bronze, my mind wanders. A flash comes: silk. The third-century *Wei Zhi* chronicle mentions that the people of the islands of Wa raised silkworms for the production of—what else?—silk. Fragments of silk have been recovered at Yoshinogari and at other sites of the same period in Japan; moreover, the ridge of Yoshinogari, just a little too high for the intensive irrigation required by rice, was until this century dotted with stands of mulberry

trees, whose leaves are the fodder of silkworms. My thoughts race.

At that time, silk production in China was monopolized and rigidly regulated by the imperial court; the *Wei Zhi*'s casual comment that the islanders of Wa just happened to produce the same precious stuff seems a little odd. Microscopic analyses of recovered silk fibers has shown that there were two introductions of silkworms into Wa, the first from southern China, the second from the Korean peninsula. At the same time, there was a rocketing demand for silk in the Roman Empire, causing the Central and South Asian middlemen to seek more of the material in China's markets. Is it possible that Chinese and Korean entrepreneurs smuggled the technology and the silkworms out of China and into the islands of Wa, creating a cheap source of supply outside the regulation of the Chinese officials? And in payment for the silk, did they offer bronze and glass and the like, just as later Western explorers and traders offered mirrors, knives and beads to tribal peoples in exchange for spices, furs and gold? Are we looking at a system of organized offshore production to evade cumbersome taxes and regulations? And did the accompanying cultural jolt kickstart a series of changes that brought Japan into the fold of civilization where other, similar cultures on the edge of China's world remained stagnant for centuries? What part did Yoshinogari play in this? And again, what of the elusive Yamatai? The swords, the silk and the soil that held them, are silent.

to be continued . . .

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