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The Beginnings

Riding a sleek train, a present-day visitor to Japan looks with delight at verdant hills soaring skyward and carefully formed rice paddies stretching away mile after mile. As his train approaches the great cities, he is impressed by the closely settled suburbs and car-laden highways that also extend as far as the eye can see.

Under the impact of those impressions, it is difficult to remember that this land is but a small strip of rumpled earthly crust, pressed between the immense and unyielding continent of Asia to the west and the equally immense and relentlessly advancing Pacific plate to the southeast. From time to time, however, the visitor is reminded of the geological foundation of Japan. It is evidenced in periodic earthquakes, smoking volcanoes, and the mountain ridges that tower above one in jagged, inhospitable beauty. It is revealed, too, in the rushing streams that for millennia have tumbled out of those mountains, joining forces with the volcanoes to deposit fertile soil on the deltas below, gradually creating the flatlands for paddies and suburbs alike.

The seasons, too, have helped shape the civilization of these islands. Japan's islands lie in a long arc from the subarctic tip of Hokkaidō south through the elongated main island of Honshū to the subtropical tip of Kyūshū and the Ryūkyū Islands. Despite its length, however, the country is essentially temperate in its annual cycle of warm and cold. Winter winds out of continental Asia blanket the Japan Sea side of

the main island with great depths of snow. As the winds flow over the high mountain ridges, they lose their moisture and spread a layer of cold dry air over the heavily populated coastal plains on the Pacific side of the archipelago. Spring ushers in a stimulating season of unpredictable days, some rainy, others cold and gusty, yet others warm and sunny, their passing marked by the successive flowering of plum, peach, and cherry trees. By June, early-summer winds out of the south carry monsoon rains up across all the islands save Hokkaidō, conveniently soaking the earth and nourishing the rice crop. Then drier winds spread across the islands a layer of muggy summer heat that lasts until the crops are grown and ready for harvesting. In the autumn, as chrysanthemums begin their flowering, climatic changes over the Pacific Ocean spawn typhoons that sporadically crash across Japan. Sometimes the winds and water ruin crops and wreck settlements, but they also can provide just enough water to sprout a winter crop, assure its growth, and start another fertile year on its course.

One must not be deceived by this picture of a benign nature. Basically Japan's islands constitute an inhospitable physical setting for a dense population. The precipitous mountains and torrential seasonal rainfall are the stuff of devastating floods, landslides, leached hillsides, and ravaged flatlands. Why, one wonders, did history and geology not conspire to make this a barren, eroded, exhausted land peopled by subsistence peasants and urban slum dwellers? How did Japanese society organize its affairs over the ages so that the habits of earth and rhythms of time were turned to advantage, making the history of Japan a history of growth and achievement rather than a history of deepening poverty, exploitation, and disorder?

PREHISTORIC CULTURES

These habits of earth and rhythms of time existed in Japan long before humans arrived. The story of early human occupation has yet to be fully told, and probably never will

be.¹ It is known, however, that some humans were in the area more than thirty thousand years ago, and the first may have arrived long before that. The movement to Japan of these people—and of other creatures such as woolly mammoths—was made possible by land connections to continental Asia. The size of the connections varied with the ebb and flow of the last ice age, and by about fifteen thousand to ten thousand years ago the land was completely cut off from the continent.

Thereafter migration to Japan became more difficult, yet some continued, mostly by way of the Korean peninsula. From about ten thousand to seven thousand years ago, Japan was supporting a population of hunting and fishing peoples who lived in partially sunken, pole-and-thatch dwellings in small and scattered arboreal communities. Most of these settlements were near the seashore, and their residents were dependent upon fish, shellfish, and other seafood for sustenance. These they obtained by netting, diving, digging, and fishing from shore and by maneuvering small dugout boats about the inlets and bays, with an occasional foray offshore on calm days. They supplemented this fare with forest fruit and game, including deer and wild boar.

The arboreal character of this first identifiable Japanese culture persisted until about the third century B.C. However, remnants, notably pottery that bears cord-markings (Jōmon), reflect a gradual cultural enrichment. Improvements and variety were introduced in domestic architecture. The single-room house was enlarged, and its framing was reorganized so that a center pole was no longer needed to support the roof. Drier stone flooring replaced bare earth. House-heating and techniques of enclosure were improved so that houses would retain some warmth even when built on the ground surface rather than in excavations. Improvements in pottery-firing provided more serviceable utensils. An increasing variety of pots and tools of daily use facilitated the handling of

1. Richard Pearson, "The Contribution of Archeology to Japanese Studies," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 2, no. 2 (summer, 1976), pp. 305–27, is a lucid statement of recent thinking on prehistoric Japan.

routine cooking, washing, mending, hunting, fishing, and cutting tasks.

By late Jōmon times some land may have been cleared for garden plots and dry field grain as well as for settlement areas. Most of Japan, however, remained a verdant forest-covered chain of islands, its soil held in place by undisturbed root systems and the ubiquitous *sasa*, a miniature-bamboo ground cover that gave the hillsides exceptional stability. Beneath the leafy cover of these sturdy forests walked generation after generation of families, accompanied by their dogs, leaving no mark upon the land save for mounds of refuse, pieces of skeleton in burial sites, and remnants of buildings, stone tools, and small decorative paraphernalia.

Beginning about the third century B.C., a new and dramatically different culture system, called Yayoi after an early archeological discovery site, made its appearance in southwest Japan. Its most notable elements were probably brought to the islands by migrants fleeing political turmoil on the continent. These elements offered Yayoi people distinct advantages of life style and equipped them with the power to overwhelm, if necessary, the less densely populated, less well-organized, and less well-armed Jōmon folk.

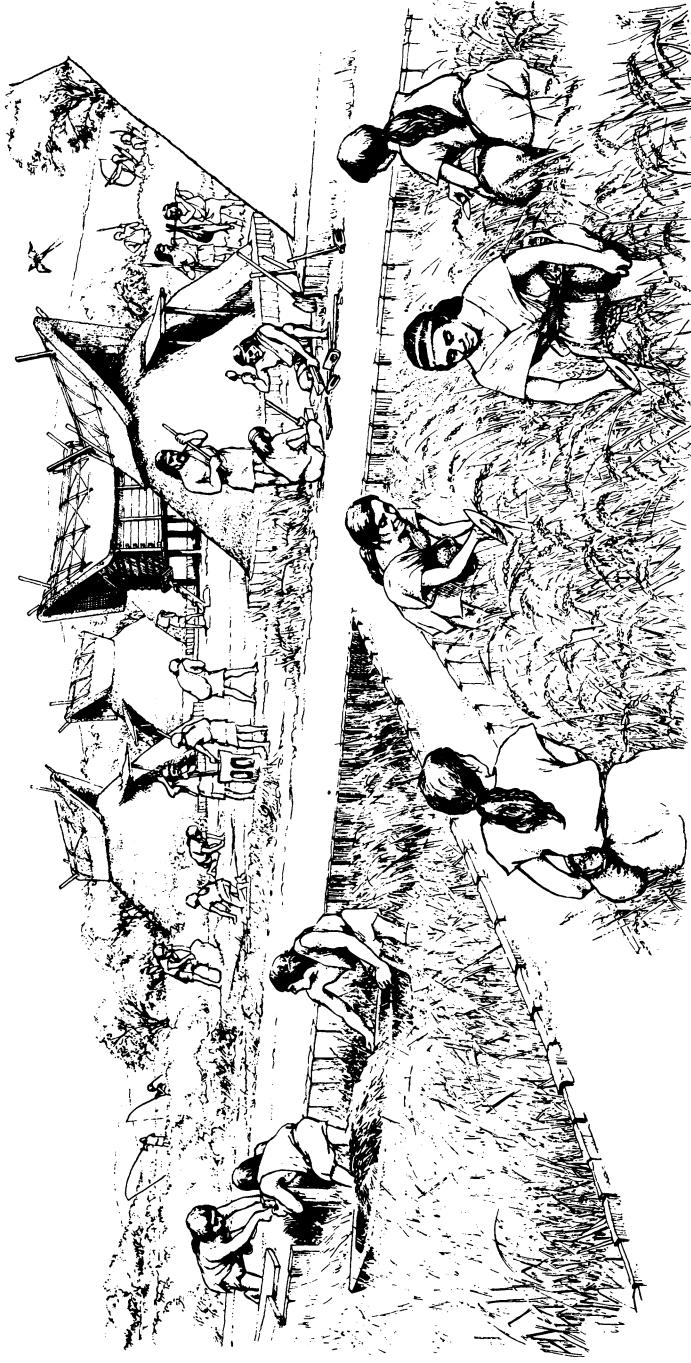
Most important, Yayoi people were basically agricultural, growing paddy rice as well as dry-field grains and storing the harvest in their villages in elevated granary buildings modeled on simpler Jōmon precedents. This food supply, being expandable and more subject to human control than were fish and game, enabled the people to live in much larger villages, some including perhaps as many as five to six hundred houses.² Yayoi culture thus sustained a much larger and probably a more healthy population. The development of a cultivated food supply freed more people for tasks other than food-gathering. This is suggested by the evidence of larger, more comfortable, and more sophisticated dwellings and out-buildings, more elaborate religious rituals, specialized metal and pottery production, limited trading activities, and a

2. Takeo Yazaki, *Social Change and the City in Japan* (Tokyo: Japan Publications, Inc., 1968), p. 7.

wealthy and powerful community leadership. This larger, more elaborately organized, and more productive population, whatever its origin or ethnic composition, was able to absorb the Jōmon peoples. How that was done, whether by peaceful conversion, integration, forcible subjugation, or a combination of processes, is unknown, but within some four centuries Yayoi customs had spread eastward and displaced older Jōmon practices throughout the archipelago.

Like the Jōmon people before them, Yayoi people enriched their culture as the centuries passed. However, whereas Jōmon enrichment was extremely slow and seems mostly to have been a product of indigenous evolution, that of Yayoi was much more rapid, indigenous creative impulses being enriched by an accelerating cultural inflow from the continent and the subsequent modification of newly acquired elements. As generations passed, Yayoi people employed more elaborate burial procedures. They acquired the potter's wheel and improved their kiln techniques. They refined and improved their tools of cultivation, replacing stone implements with metal ones, and they kept more domestic animals. They developed a spinning and weaving technology. They acquired and accumulated treasures from China, Korea, and other continental sources, including coins, mirrors, bracelets, and beads. After initially importing their metalware, they eventually acquired a bronze and iron technology of their own, which in turn made possible superior craftsmanship for functional, decorative, and religious purposes.

By the second century of the Christian Era, a substantial population, the ancestral core of today's Japanese, extended from Kyūshū to northeastern Honshū. These people lived in a large number of agricultural villages that were linked, locally at least, by primitive trade, social interchange, and political organization. They were sustained by an irrigated rice culture whose basic character was to remain unchanged until the modern age. Despite temporal and regional variations, they shared much material culture and many social practices, for example in their manner of tillage and their burial customs. In its spread to the east, Yayoi culture had changed profoundly the character of human life in Japan. It had also



Artist's Conception of Yayoi Villagers at Work

Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia

set in motion a visual metamorphosis, turning more and more of the forested lowlands into open, sunlit fields of paddy rice that even our modern visitor would find strikingly familiar.

THE YAMATO AGE

The ecological transformation that Yayoi people set in motion during the third century B.C. laid the foundation for social changes that would, by the sixth century of the Christian Era, alter the face of Japanese society as profoundly as the spread of rice culture was changing the face of the land. Although the course of the social transformation is not sharply delineated, its general character is evident. Most strikingly a new technology of warfare made its appearance, and those who employed it were able to impose on Japan a radically new phenomenon: political consolidation. The new social element was fighting men mounted on horses, protected by slat armor and helmets, and armed with swords and bows. It is not clear whether these fighting men were large numbers of invaders from the continent or mostly, as seems more probable, natives of the islands who acquired continental weaponry and then reproduced it in quantity for their own use. What is clear is that by the fourth century this new military technology was enabling some people to impose their will over larger and larger numbers of others and thereby wrest from them the resources necessary to live more elegantly and extend their sway further than had ever before been possible in Japan.

Little is known about the common people whose exertions sustained this ruling elite, because so few records mention them. The most useful written source is a Chinese report of ca. A.D. 297. It speaks of the Japanese, called "the people of Wa," in this way:

The land of Wa is warm and mild. In winter as in summer the people live on raw vegetables and go about barefooted. They have [or live in] houses; father and mother, elder and younger, sleep separately.

The Chinese visitor reported of Japanese religious practices that

Whenever they undertake an enterprise or a journey and discussion arises, they bake bones and divine in order to tell whether fortune will be good or bad. First they announce the object of divination, using the same manner of speech as in tortoise-shell divination; then they examine the cracks made by the fire and tell what is to come to pass.

Japanese family relations also caught the Chinese eye:

In their meetings and in their deportment, there is no distinction between father and son or between men and women. . . . Ordinarily, men of importance have four or five wives; the lesser ones, two or three. Women are not loose in morals or jealous.

Concerning crimes and their adjudication the visitor reported,

There is no theft, and litigation is infrequent. In case of violation of law, the light offender loses his wife and children by confiscation; as for the grave offender, the members of his household and also his kinsmen are exterminated.

Even the social and political order did not escape notice:

There are class distinctions among the people, and some men are vassals of others. Taxes are collected. There are granaries as well as markets in each province, where necessaries are exchanged under the supervision of the Wa officials.

The "men of importance" who enjoyed the company of "four or five wives" also enjoyed the deference of their inferiors.

When the lowly meet men of importance on the road, they stop and withdraw to the roadside. In conveying

messages to them or addressing them, they either squat or kneel, with both hands on the ground. This is the way they show respect. When responding, they say "ah," which corresponds to the affirmative "yes."³

Most other surviving records date from later centuries and really describe the world of the rulers, the "men of importance," not that of the tillers and haulers. One can form a general picture of the religious lives of these early Japanese, however, by combining the evidence of these later records with the recorded folk practices of recent centuries. The picture that emerges is one of villagers who made their way through life as have people in other societies, in the face of various evil spirits and with the support of many helpful deities (*kami*) of place and moment. *Kami* of children, the harvest, the hearth, and of travel and awesome places were accessible by prayer at a multitude of tutelary shrines. And throughout the year, village festivals provided moments to pacify fickle or fearsome deities and thank the gods for their benevolence or restraint.

Of the rulers much more is known because this new aristocratic leadership used its resources to assure its eternal glory. The splendor of those early rulers is still visible, immortalized in huge hillock-sized burial mounds, some of them surrounded by wide moats, the largest of which embrace oblong areas as much as a half-mile in length. The great size of these tombs shows the immense work forces that rulers were able to employ year after year. The tombs also contain artifacts that disclose many aspects of the age. Buried with a dead ruler were the implements of his life: helmet, armor, swords, bows, arrows, knives, beads, pottery, and other possessions. Decorative designs and wall drawings illustrative of his glories also recorded the taste and events of the day. And around the tomb were placed clay figurines (*haniwa*) of warriors, other people, houses of many sorts, furnishings, saddled horses, and other paraphernalia of life.

These remains demonstrate the military character of

3. Ryusaku Tsunoda et al., comp., *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 6-7. From the *Wei Chih*.

this ruling elite. However, an enduring supremacy cannot be maintained by might alone, and the more subtle aspects of this aristocracy's governance are reflected in the oldest surviving domestic written records of Japan. These include fragmentary local records called *Fudoki* [Topographical records] and, more important, two works entitled *Kojiki* [Records of ancient matters] and *Nihongi* [Chronicles of Japan], which were written in the years 712 and 720 respectively. These records yield much information on both the structure and process of the new governing system. They suggest that the new elite arose by gradually forging local and then regional polities dominated by hereditary aristocratic familial groups (*uji*). By about A.D. 300 several major *uji* in the Yamato plain near present-day Osaka and Kyoto had been subordinated to one of their number, an *uji* commonly called the Yamato *uji* and putatively ancestral to the later imperial family of Japan. With the Yamato *uji*'s assertion of a preeminent role in a populous part of Japan, the first identifiable Japanese state had come into being.

The *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* record these initial successes of the Yamato *uji* because they are written versions of its orally transmitted traditions. They were set down at a time when Yamato rulers were seeking to strengthen their position by claiming an imperial authority in Japan analogous to that of the triumphant emperors of the contemporary T'ang dynasty in China. They asserted the unique character of the Yamato *uji*, and hence the propriety of its sovereign claims, by showing the direct descent of its chieftains from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and through her from the original godly founders of the universe. The *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* also record the subsequent growth of Yamato power, showing that the process involved not only conquest but also complex political maneuver. Yamato leaders, who could be either male or female, frequently formed alliances with heads of other *uji*, most often through the kinship mechanisms of marriage and adoption. These ties they solidified by guaranteeing allied *uji* their lands and by awarding their chiefs appropriately gratifying titles and honors. The treatment of deities, whose genealogical relationships were carefully elaborated in the written rec-

ord, suggests too that Yamato leaders consistently tried to conciliate the vanquished, or at least clarify their new political status, by incorporating their gods into the Yamato pantheon at prudently subordinate levels.

From about A.D. 300 to 550, Yamato leaders used political techniques of this sort to extend their sway within the islands. After consolidating a base position in the Osaka-Kyoto district, they spread outward. Gradually most of Japan west of the Kantō plain (surrounding Tokyo) came under their influence. They established and maintained diplomatic contact with rulers in both Korea and China. And they assisted allied rulers in Korea by dispatching military expeditions involving hundreds of vessels and tens of thousands of men.⁴

By about A.D. 500, Yamato rulers were imposing a substantial degree of order on their aristocratic subordinates. They were developing a rather standardized set of hereditary ranks and titles, often assigning them, however, in accordance with the real power of the aristocratic recipients. They tried to limit the land-holding authority of subordinate *uji* chiefs by claiming that such chiefs were permitted to administer their lands and people only by direct appointment of the Yamato ruler and in accordance with Yamato regulations. Of necessity as much as choice, no doubt, Yamato rulers utilized the leaders of some powerful *uji* as regular governmental councillors. However, they tried to offset their influence by assigning governmental functions to others who did not command large *uji*. These latter, some of whom were recent immigrants, served as scribes, religious functionaries, supervisory experts on such matters as metal or textile production, military commanders, and territorial administrators in the Yamato *uji*'s own lands.

Certain aspects of the polity, notably the character of governing authority and the central importance of kinship and heredity, deserve fuller attention because they were to remain key aspects of Japanese governance until recent times. The value attached to kinship and heredity was re-

4. John W. Hall, *Japan: From Prehistory to Modern Times* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1970), p. 38.

flected in the central role in social organization of the patrilineal principle—the belief that leadership of a group properly descended generation by generation to that man (or in certain ages man or woman) who is the designated heir, either by birth or adoption, of the current chief.⁵ Thus in the Yamato age the apex of the polity was the Yamato ruler, the hereditary chief (*uji no kami*) of the Yamato *uji*, and most of his major subordinates were hereditary chiefs of lesser *uji*.

The character of governing authority was apparent in the functions claimed by these hereditary Yamato rulers. The chief, whether male or female, claimed authority in both secular and religious spheres. These embraced the secular tasks of military and political command, settlement of disputes, and reward and punishment and the religious task of assuring the benevolence of the gods. The importance of the secular functions seems self-evident to us, but clearly Yamato rulers also regarded the handling of the religious task as central to their temporal authority. Rituals that would sustain the links between ruler and deity were carefully performed at Yamato *uji* shrines, most notably that at Ise, south of modern Nagoya. And great care was taken to preserve memories of the ruler's ancestry, as shown by the tortuous genealogies of gods and rulers in the *Kojiki*. Later, in the seventh century, the Yamato *uji*'s body of religious tradition was given lexical identity as Shintō, "the way of the gods," and apologists for the regime asserted that Shintō was the indigenous religion of the entire society over which Yamato chiefs ruled. Having

5. John Whitney Hall, *Government and Local Power in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), has used this principle of patrilineage in organizing his study of long-term evolution of the Japanese polity. As Hall points out, from the days of Yamato to the nineteenth century patrilineages were perceived as the basic building blocks of most Japanese politics, whether in the form of *uji*, classical aristocratic lineages, or later *bushi* families. Repeatedly attempts were made to organize land and human resources according to patrilineal principles. Indeed, one can argue that the root determinant of the periodic crises of the Japanese polity was the natural biological limitation of patrilineal governance, meaning the proliferation of progeny until the emotional bonds of kinship were stretched so far over social, spatial, and chronological distance that they lost their persuasiveness. This statement could apply to the crises of the Yamato state, the Taika state, the *shōen* system, the Hōjō regency, medieval *bushi* lineages, and finally the Tokugawa bureaucratic order.

made this claim, they could then try to rebuff challengers by insisting that because of the Yamato ruler's special genealogical link to Amaterasu and the founding gods, only the ruler or properly designated experts could communicate effectively with the gods and so bring peace and order to the realm.

Chiefs of other *uji* held assigned hereditary titles, but they also were identified by the Yamato chief in terms of kinship ties. These ties might stem from a marriage or adoption arrangement, or they might be traced back to the gods if a more immediate relationship could not be claimed. The Yamato ruler asserted that the duties expected of a subordinate chief were a function of that hereditary familial linkage, and not a function of individual appointment. Hence it was the ascribed duty of all members of subordinate *uji*, as putative relatives of the Yamato, to serve the successive heads of the Yamato family line, no matter how independent in actuality the subordinate group might be.

Some functions that required special skills were entrusted to nonrelatives, often craftsmen from Korea, but in those cases too the functions were regarded as hereditary tasks. It was up to the person entrusted with the task to perform it faithfully for his master's lineage and to train his descendants to take his place. These expectations made that relationship quasi-kin in nature, hereditary, and identified with a specific function. The Yamato ruler's position was thus buttressed not only by military power, civil alliance, and material reward, but also by principles of religious authority, kin obligation, and hereditary privilege.

It would be misleading to think of the Yamato state as a stabilized political system. It was not. It was a system in constant flux and marked by severe tensions and sharply contradictory tendencies. It was shaken by periodic power struggles at the center and by military and diplomatic reverses in the field. One reason for this situation was that the centuries of Yamato power were centuries of political turmoil on the continent. China was ravaged by a long era of civil strife that ended with reunification under the Sui (590–618) and T'ang (618–906) dynasties. The Korean peninsula was torn by war

among competing Korean states. The latter turmoil involved Japan because Japanese military forces that had been deployed to Korea were defeated during the mid-sixth century, to the detriment of Yamato prestige. Moreover the continental disorder produced a flow of refugees to Japan, and with them came ideas and equipment from the mainland.

During the sixth century the most influential of these mainland ideas were associated with Buddhism, which appealed to Japanese in several ways. The Yamato ruler's authority was rooted in the Shintō myth of special origin that gave him unique access to the god-ancestors and hence a unique capacity to obtain godly intercession that could bring good fortune and avert catastrophe. Buddhism, with its basic canon (sutras) and extensive theological commentaries, presented alternative statements about the path to godly power. Through knowledge of the sutras, the ceremonies, and the secrets of Buddhism one could invoke godly powers independently of Yamato wishes, and the prospect of political advantage made Buddhism attractive to the ambitious. The introduction of Buddhism to Japan was also facilitated by its congenial similarity to Shintō.⁶ It encompassed a large number of benevolent deities and religious practices and offered them freely to a people accustomed to thinking of *kami* as a variegated collection of forces to be dealt with through an equally varied set of rituals and activities. Furthermore, as thoughtful Japanese probed the deeper philosophical levels of Buddhism, they discovered a transcendent religious vision quite unlike anything present in Shintō. That vision opened up a conceptual universe of breathtaking proportions and impelled people to investigate other facets of continental learning as well, most notably Confucianism, with its elaborate body of secular political wisdom.

Perhaps the most notable new equipment from the continent was the supply of horses and mounted fighting paraphernalia, which kept growing in quantity. Rivals of Yamato, some of whom were situated in western Japan and nearer to

6. Kyoko Motomachi Nakamura, trans., *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 45ff., discusses Shintō-Buddhist similarities thoughtfully.

Korea than the Yamato themselves, had access to it. Thus Yamato leaders found themselves facing ever more powerful domestic challenges, which compelled them to increase their own power and rely on ever more powerful—and hence ever less docile—supporters. In short, the regime was engaged in an arms race.

Continental influences also played a broader historic role by helping make these centuries of Yamato rule ones in which the economy of Japan expanded rapidly. Increased use of draft animals, notably horses and oxen, and better hoes, spades, and sickles increased per-capita productivity. The spreading use of millet and barley and diffusion of sericulture permitted tillage of drier areas and better utilization of work time. The use of green fertilizer and night soil, the careful arranging of rice fields, more extensive irrigation systems, and the use of wooden pipes and more sturdy dikes increased per-hectare crop yields. These factors, together with the opening of more and more land to tillage, were linked to population as an ecological “cybernetic loop.” Thanks to increasing amounts of available food, more and more people lived into the productive and reproductive years of adulthood, and that in turn allowed yet more land to be opened to production. In consequence the population of the islands continued growing, reaching perhaps two to three million by ca. A.D. 550.⁷

Most of these people lived in peasant families, but some were artisans engaged in industrial activities, often, no doubt, as by-employments. Enriched by mainland techniques, Yamato-era Japanese used better carpenter tools, including saws, clamps, and nails. They mastered gold, silver, and copper casting and gilding. More varieties of silk and hemp weaving and dyeing became established. A highway system facilitated movement of people and goods, and a sub-

7. The figure of two to three million is an arbitrary compromise. Michiko Y. Aoki, *Ancient Myths and Early History of Japan* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974), p. 71, reports that 7,053 households constituted 3 percent “of the total taxable population in Japan at that time” (ca. A.D. 550). At five persons per household this gives a taxable population of about 1,175,000 people. Untaxable numbers are not given. According to Irene B. Taeuber, *The Population of Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), the tradi-