

# A narrative analysis of Yamatotakeru's legend as described in the *Kojiki*

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## General resume

This work focuses on Yamatotakeru's 倭建命 legendary territorial conquests (heretofore, "the legend of Yamatotakeru") as described in the *Kojiki*. It is an episode that occupies almost all of the Chronicle of Emperor Keikō 景行記. By means of a careful analysis of the singular phrasing and narrative arrangement of the *Kojiki*, our work reflects on how the hero's conquests are presented in this ancient book.

One particular feature of the legend of Yamatotakeru is the large number of songs included in the narrative. Many of them express the relationship between the hero and his wives. Despite a long history of extensive scholarship, we find that research on the meaning of the emotional expressions included in these songs or on the status of the singers, is still somehow insufficient to explain their importance inside the legend of Yamatotakeru. The global aim of this work is therefore the clarification of the role played by the various types of emotional expressions that appear throughout the whole legend, especially those included in the songs. To achieve this goal, a reexamination of these songs and the relations between the legend's characters (where the singers themselves are central) will be needed, always with a firm footing on the narrative layout and language particular to the *Kojiki*.

## Chapter 1: Yamatotakeru and his fierce temperament

### An envoy's talent

This chapter deals with the expression *takeku araki kokoro* 建荒之情 and its role in the *Kojiki* narration of the Yamatotakeru episode, for it triggers the hero's dispatchment to conquer the West (*seisei* 西征). Contrary to the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 narrative, where this same dispatchment is induced by

an external factor (namely, the rebellion of the Kumaso 熊襲 people and their inroads on the frontier districts), the *Kojiki* tells us that Yamatotakeru is ordered to go and subdue the Western regions because of his wild and fierce nature, expressed in the syntagm *takeku araki kokoro*. This expression appears just after Yamatotakeru's killing of his elder brother and it becomes the keyword that provides an orientation of the narrative, for not only does it explain the nature of the hero, but also determines the direction of his future adventures. The element *take* 建 should be understood as expressing a suitable nature to be dispatched to the regions of the East and the West, and pacify them by *kotomuke* 言向. On the other hand, the element *araki* 荒 becomes the source of the extraordinary power that allows Yamatotakeru to confront the savage deities (*araburu kami* 荒神). In short, this expression may convey a natural gift to show a power to subdue countries. Along with providing information about the natural gifts of Yamatotakeru as an envoy charged with the mission of conquering the whole country, it should be placed as the explanation by which this takeover episode originates in the person of Yamatotakeru himself. The conclusion is that this expression provides a layout for the subjugation of the Land to be narrated as the legend of Yamatotakeru.

## **Chapter 2: The seizure of Izumo and the praising of the sword**

### **From the interpretation of the “Saminashi” song**

This chapter consists of a reconsideration of the narrative meaning of the defeat Izumotakeru suffered by an unfair stratagem. The central object of interpretation here will be the 23<sup>rd</sup> song of the *Kojiki*, intonated by Yamatotakeru after he subjugated Izumotakeru, the hero of Izumo. The song says “the many-clouds-rising Izumotakeru wears a sword with many vines wrapped around it, but with no blade inside, alas!”<sup>1</sup>. Up to now, scholars have interpreted the word “*saminashi*” in the fifth verse as meaning “no blade inside” (*sami nashi* さ身なし), and have connected this expression to the the turning point of the episode, namely, the defeat of Izumotakeru. Such a connection is understandable, because

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1 (*yatumesasu / izumotakeru ga / hakeru tachi / tsuzura sahamaki / saminashi ni ahare* やつめさす 出雲建が 佩ける大刀 黒葛多纏き さみなしにあはれ). English version from Donald Philippi, *Kojiki*, (University of Tokyo Press, 1968), pp. 236-37.

in the encounter between the two heroes, Izumotakeru received, in exchange of his, a fake sword from Yamatotakeru. However, in light of the particular writing of the *Kojiki*, we think this expression should be read as “with no rust” (*sabi nashi* 錆無し), which leads to the interpretation of the concerned song as a praising chant to the sword of Izumotakeru. In other words, the 23<sup>rd</sup> song can be understood as a proclamation of the seizure of the Izumo region, which was important enough to be praised by a song. In the *Kojiki*, Izumo was the region where Susanowo no mikoto, descendant of Izanaki and Izanami, exerted his influence for the first time. Later in the narrative, Izumo is also considered as the home of Ōkuninushi no kami 大国主神, the deity that ruled the country of Ashihara no nakatsu kuni 葦原中国. Thereafter, as Izumo becomes the theater of the subduing of Ashihara no nakatsu kuni, we can infer an extremely close connection between Izumo and the episode of the Conquest of the Land by the power of Takamanohara 高天原.

The legend of Yamatotakeru can be considered in this same light. Given the intimate link between the seizure of Izumo and the episode of the Conquest of the Land, we inferred here that the reason for depicting the defeat of Izumotakeru in the episode of the Subjugation of the West (*seisei* 西征) was to allocate Yamatotakeru, now endowed with the power of the Izumo region, a starting point for his mission to subdue the Twelve East Countries.

### **Chapter 3: Expressive ways in the episode of the self-drowning of Princess Ototachibanahime 弟橘比売命**

#### **A symbolic mode**

Here we examine the chapter where Princess Ototachibanahime, the first wife of Yamatotakeru, drowns herself in the sea to save him. We explore the symbolic mode by which the narrative presents Ototachibanahime as “the woman of Azuma”, an expression that may also mean “my wife”. Even though the big picture of the narrative in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* is roughly the same for this episode, there still exist some differences that are hard to ignore, such as the mention/non-mention of the princess’ origins, the presence/absence of songs, or the description of the princess’ tomb. In the *Kojiki*, no explicit mention of the princess’ lineage is included, but, by means of

the name “Tachibana 橘”, her origin is symbolically placed in a large territory encompassing the regions of Hitachi 常陸, Musashi 武蔵 and Shimosa 下総.

The story is set in the region of Sagamu, which may be considered as the base of Azuma. Even though there is no evidence linking the name “Tachibana” to the toponym of Sagamu, a close examination of *Kojiki*'s peculiar 24<sup>th</sup> song will show us that a narrative function linking Ototachibanahime to the region of Sagamu 相模 is at work here. The song says “O you, my lord, alas –, you who once, standing among the flames of the burning fire, spoke my name on the mountain-surrounded plain of Sagamu!”<sup>2</sup>, and by means of this singular phrasing, the *Kojiki* situates Ototachibanahime as an entity symbolizing the region of Azuma. Hence we conclude that the narrative, by the inclusion of a relationship with a native woman, aimed to effectively anchor the episode of the Eastern Expedition (*tōsei* 東征) by Yamatotakeru in the real East countries.

#### **Chapter 4: Time consciousness in the song of Sakaori Sanctuary**

##### **Narrative evolution to the song of Tsukitachi**

In this chapter we address the song of Sakaori Sanctuary (*Kojiki*'s 25<sup>th</sup> song), a dialogue-shaped chant that precedes the marriage of Yamatotakeru and Princess Miyazuhime 美夜受比売, and we reflect on its connection with Yamatotakeru's revelation of his feelings. In poem 426 of the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集<sup>3</sup>, on a night in the middle of his journey, a traveler recalls his faraway hometown's wife, out of a sudden yearning for the house he left behind. Provided one reads it as linking the concepts of travel and time, the *Man'yōshū* poem may as well be interpreted as an expression of the author's consciousness of his parents and sister.

If we consider those poetical expressions, we will realize that the same feelings could be attributed to the singer of *Kojiki*'s 25<sup>th</sup> song. This one is a

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2 *Sanesashi / sagamu no wono ni / moyuru hi no / honaka ni tachite / tohishi kimi ha mo* さねなし 相模の小野に 燃ゆる火の 火中に立ちて 問ひし君はも. English version from Donald Philippi, *Kojiki, op. cit.*, p. 242

3 *Man'yōshū* 万葉集<sup>3</sup>, ed. Kojima Noriyuki 小島憲之, Kinoshita Masatoshi 木下正俊, Higashino Haruyuki 東野治之, *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 新編日本古典文学全集 (Shōgakukan, 1995), vol. 6, p. 239.

chant expressing the yearning of Yamatotakeru for his wife Miyazuhime in the middle of his hard journey. Yamatotakeru's expression of his feelings is guided by a particular narrative arrangement in the *Kojiki*, which places the hero's engagement to Princess Miyazuhime before his real departure to the Eastern Expedition. Hence it can be said this song foreshadows a deep affection between Yamatotakeru and Miyazuhime, which can be corroborated later on, in the "moon-raising dialogue songs" (27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>).

Here we analyze as well the 26<sup>th</sup> song, which contextually follows the previous 25<sup>th</sup>. This 26<sup>th</sup> song corresponds to the uttering of a sequence up to number 10, a figure that epitomizes completion. We conclude that this song tells that the term of Yamatotakeru's vow, namely, the day of fulfillment of his Eastern Expedition (which also means the reunion with Princess Miyazuhime) is about to come.

## **Chapter 5: Honorific expressions in the "moon-raising songs"**

### **Man and woman singing in turn**

Here we examine the "moon-raising dialogue songs" (songs 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>), by which the marriage of Yamatotakeru and Miyazuhime is decided. More particularly, we analyze the honorific expressions appearing in these songs and reflect on their role in the expressive ways of the affection between the two lovers. For instance, we can see the modal difference between the expressions *wa ga keseru* 我が着せる ("the [skirt] I wear", written in a humble expressive mode, typical of a woman addressing a man hierarchically superior to her) and *na ga keseru* 汝が着せる ("the [skirt] you wear", written in a courteous mode typical of a man addressing to a woman inferior to him). If we consider the yearning of Yamatotakeru for his faraway wife Miyazuhime, expressed in the above-discussed song 25, we can think that here the courteous expression he addresses to her was employed as a mark of intimacy. Similarly, the humble expression the princess addresses to Yamatotakeru should be understood as a sign of her deep affection for him. Both expressions, along with the songs including them, can be interpreted hence as a means for the actors to assure themselves of their mutual love.

We conclude that the meaning of these honorific expressions is to be found

on the presentation of the episode of fulfillment of the Twelve East Countries' submission as a lyrical narration centered on the relationship between Yamatotakeru and Miyazuhime, the latter as the "Woman from the Rising Sun" (*himukashi no onna* ヒムカシの女).

## **Chapter 6: The "lifting of the word" (*kotoage* 言挙) addressed to the deity of Mount Ibuki**

### **Yamatotakeru's deviation from his *kotomuke* mission**

Here we discuss the defeat of Yamatotakeru by the deity of Mount Ibuki 伊服岐能山. By means of a comparison of the differences between *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*'s depictions, we try to grasp the peculiarity of the *Kojiki*'s narrative of this episode. In contrast to the *Nihon shoki*, which depicts a big snake as the deity of Ibuki mountain 五十葺山, the *Kojiki* presents this deity as a white boar. Hence it can be thought that the *Nihon shoki*, by means of this snake-shaped depiction, attributes to this deity a malevolent nature, whereas the *Kojiki*, by means of the presentation of a boar coloured in sacred-symbolizing white, provides the deity of Mount Ibuki with a strong sacred nature. This leads us to think that this deity has not, in the *Kojiki*'s narrative context, any sign of savageness or wildness in his character.

Considering as well the fact that Mount Ibuki is situated at the West of the Owari region, which was the starting point of Yamatotakeru's Eastern Expedition, it becomes clear that the white boar deity of Mount Ibuki falls outside the boundaries of that expedition. Here it should be remembered that Emperor Keikō's orders were to subdue by *kotomuke* 言向 the savage deities (*araburu kami* 荒ふる神) of the Eastern regions. Therefore, it can be affirmed that Yamatotakeru's blasphemous *kotoage* 言挙, which consists on a solemn uttering of his murderous intentions towards Mount Ibuki's deity (performed in front of this same deity), is an act that goes in every respect against Emperor Keikō's orders. If Yamatotakeru performs this *kotoage*, and attempts to kill a deity who has not a savage nature, it is in reality to obey *what he thought to be* the real intentions of Emperor Keikō. Those intentions are expressed at the beginning of the Eastern Expedition, when Yamatotakeru grieves to his aunt, saying "I am sure that [the emperor] wishes me dead!" (*are wo sude ni*

*shine to omohoshimesu* 吾を既に死ねと思ほし看す). Hence we conclude that Yamatotakeru's fatal decision to face the deity of Mount Ibuki was made out of an intention to fulfill the so-called will of the emperor towards him, namely to get him killed during the expedition.

## **Chapter 7: The narrative role of the “single pine song”**

### **A chant of yearning and exhaustion**

Here we discuss the “single pine song” (29<sup>th</sup> song), chanted by Yamatotakeru in Wotsunosaki after his defeat, and reflect on its role in the whole legend of the hero. The lyrics may signify: “Were you a man, surely you would be a great lord with a no less great sword and armour!”. The narrative function of this song is to express the contrast between a pinetree, which symbolizes eternity, and Yamatotakeru, who is already bound to death. In addition, in the first verses of that song we see the line “in the direction of Owari”<sup>4</sup>, which makes us think of Princess Miyazuhime. To find the reason why those lyrics evoke the princess, surely we have to take into account that Yamatotakeru's uttering of this song was triggered by the discovery of the forgotten sword before the pine. Thus, we can infer that the lyrics of this song reflect a narrative overlap of the sword he left at the house of princess Miyazuhime, and the sword he found before the solitary pine. Through a comparison with the pinetree, this song tells of the exhaustion of Yamatotakeru, but it functions at the same time as an envoy to song 33, which describes the death of the hero. Our conclusion is that this song wraps up the whole Eastern Expedition as the love story between Yamatotakeru and Miyazuhime.

## **Chapter 8: Yamatotakeru's loyalty as described in the *kunishinobi* songs**

Here we discuss the *kunishinobi* songs 思国歌 (“literal, songs of homesickness for one's own country), intoned by Yamatotakeru, which we interpret as praising chants of the imperial authority. Our reflection attempts

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4 *Owari ni / tada ni mukaheru* 尾張に 直に向かへる. Cf. Konoshi Takamitsu 神野志隆光, Yamaguchi Yoshinori 山口佳紀, eds., *Kojiki* 古事記, *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 新編日本古典文学全集 (Shōgakukan, 1997), vol. 1, p. 233.

to shed light on the emotion that prompted Yamatotakeru to sing those songs, this by means of the analysis of the second one (31<sup>st</sup> song), which says: “you whose life is safe, may you garnish your hair with leaves from Mount Heguri, you!”<sup>5</sup>. Examples from the *Man'yōshū* and the *Nihon shoki* show that the name “*uzu*” 髻華 is surely some apparel worn by emissaries from deities and kings, and, judging from the expression “*uzu ni sase / sono ko*”, we view this song as an appeal from Yamatotakeru to the emperor’s subjects, summoning them to serve the emperor. Such interpretation is based on Yamatotakeru’s thinking and behaviour, inasmuch as he is presented as a character that faithfully accomplishes the emperor’s orders. The fatal *kotoage* that Yamatotakeru performs in front of the deity of Mount Ibuki may appear as contrary to those orders, but it is possible to think that such an act was triggered by Yamatotakeru’s will to remain faithful to what he thought to be the intentions of the emperor, for he believed the latter wanted him dead.

Seen in that light, it is not unreasonable to interpret this 31<sup>st</sup> song as a chant of loyalty to the emperor. We conclude therefore that it is a song of praise and glorification of the imperial authority, and it is meaningful in that it places Yamatotakeru in the role of a emissary unconditionally loyal to the emperor.

## **Chapter 9: Narrative function of Yamatotakeru’s decease song**

### **A lyrical end to the Eastern Expedition**

In this chapter we deal with the 33<sup>rd</sup> song, intonated by Yamatotakeru just before passing away. It says: “At my wife’s place I left my sword. Alas, my sword!”<sup>6</sup>, and here we reflect on the narrative meaning of Yamatotakeru’s last moments, evoked in these lyrics. In the *Kojiki*, generally speaking, when somebody is dispatched to conquer a land, the mission ends with a “report of return” called *kaheri-koto[maos]* 復奏 / 覆奏, or, when appropriate, with an explicit mention to the absence of such a report (*kaheri-koto[maosazu]* 不復

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5 Inochi no matakemu hito ha tatamikomo heguri no yama no kumakashi ga ha wo uzu ni sase sono ko 命の全けむ人は 晷薦 平群の山の 熊白櫛が葉を 髻華に挿せ その子。 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

6 Wotome no toko no be ni / wa ga okishi / tsurugi no tachi / sono tachi ha ya 嬢子の 床の辺に 我が置きし 剣の大刀 その大刀はや。 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

奏). In that sense, it is reasonable to say that *Kojiki*'s episodes of submission of a given land are framed on a command from the dispatcher and a *kaheri-koto* from the executor. This narrative frame is used in the book as a means to express the completion of the mission. However, Yamatotakeru's legend of conquest does not end with a *kaheri-koto*, but with the expression "having uttered that song, he passed away" (歌竟即崩), which follows song 33, chanted by the hero. An analysis of the lyrics of this song will tell that they express the separation of Yamatotakeru from the two symbols of the Eastern Expedition, namely the sword Kusanagi 草那芸劍 and Princess Miyazuhime, the "Eastern woman". If we consider that double separation, we can see that by means of an immediate connection of the song to the expression "having uttered that song, he passed away" (歌竟即崩), the narrative superposes the death of the hero to the end of the Eastern Expedition, the latter epitomized by both his wife and sword. Our conclusion is therefore that the expression that tells the death of the hero is a means to depict the Eastern Expedition as "the legend" of Yamatotakeru.

#### **Chapter 10: The notions of "Yamato" and "Heaven" in the legend of Yamatotakeru**

In this last chapter we discuss the episode of the funeral of Yamatotakeru, and reflect on the meaning of the burial rites held for him by his wives and children, who, contrarily to the *Nihon shoki*'s narrative, comes from "Yamato 倭". Also, we try to shed some light on the meaning of that "Heaven" (Ame 天) where Yamatotakeru is supposed to have gone after his death. The "descent" from Yamato of his wives and children may be interpreted both as a memorial service held to pacify the soul of Yamatotakeru, who died in a distant land, and as a rite meant to appease the wild (*ara* 荒) nature of Yamatotakeru, which was evoked at the beginning of the Western Expedition by the expression *takeku araki kokoro* 建荒之情. Considering that Yamatotakeru's conquest of the country is centered in the relationships with his wives, and framed as such in the countries of Azuma (Ototachibana) and Himukashi (Miyazuhime), there is no doubt that the expression "the descent from Yamato of his wives and children" conveys the fact that the Yamato includes the countries conquered in

the Western and Eastern expeditions. A particular actor represents each one of those countries, namely Kumaso, Izumo, Azuma and Himukashi, and all of them constitute the land of Yamato. However, beyond this land there exists a “Heaven” to which Yamatotakeru fled transformed into a giant white bird. In a way, *Kojiki*’s examples confirm the equivalence between this Heaven and the High Celestial Plain, and the fact that the latter was the real starting point of the submission campaign of the Ashihara country. The funeral of Yamatotakeru describes the end of the long adventure of the Land submission, which traces back to the Age of the Gods. In that sense, we assert that this funeral plays the role of a narrative interface between the chronicle of Emperor Keikō and the historical emperors who came after.

### **Conclusion**

Provided one looks at the Western and Eastern expeditions as a whole, it is possible to conclude that the legend of Yamatotakeru is intimately connected with *Kojiki*’s mythical world. The Eastern Expedition can be placed as the last step of the submission and integration of countries into the empire territory, an integration that includes episodes such as the conquest of the Middle country of Ashihara in *Kojiki*’s first book, or the subduing of the Twelve East Countries by Emperor Jinmu 神武天皇. Such a global vision of *Kojiki*’s narrative would explain why the Eastern Expedition of Yamatotakeru does not end with the usual *kaherikoto* 復奏 (report of mission completed) to the emperor, but with his flight to Heaven (namely, the High Celestial Plain of Takamanohara 高天原), after having transformed himself into a big white bird. This shows that the conquest of the land, which started out of a wish of Takamanohara’s celestial deities, was finally set to come back to Takamanohara thanks to Yamatotakeru’s death and return to Heaven. The battles in both the Western and the Eastern expeditions were not achievements limited within the time boundaries of Emperor Keikō’s chronicle, for they play an extremely important role in the narrative frame of the *Kojiki* as a whole.

Furthermore, the depiction of those achievements, particularly that of the Eastern Expedition, are centered on Yamatotakeru’s relationship with women. This is a particularity of *Kojiki*’s narrative, which differs from *Nihon*

*shoki*'s. Various types of songs are exchanged, either with the Azuma Woman (Ototachibana) or with the Himukashi Woman (Miyazuhime), giving the reader a flavor of the affection between Yamatotakeru and those women. Most of these songs are particular to the *Kojiki*, and it can be thought that the inclusion in the legend of Yamatotakeru of those lyrical chants that expresses the love between him and some women was done in order to highlight the feelings of the characters around Yamatotakeru.

Finally, depicting the last step of the Land's submission as the lyrical story of one character (Yamatotakeru) was surely a device intended to engrave in the memory of future readers the historical hegemony achieved by Emperor Keikō as "the legend of Yamatotakeru". This scheme is well expressed in a phrase of *Kojiki*'s preface, which says "in order to transmit it to the future generations" (*nochi no yo ni tsutahe*[ru] 後世に流へ). This will stand for our conclusion.