

KOJIKI

FROM BOOK II

The Yamato hero: The story of Yamato-takeru, son of Emperor Keikō

The two brothers

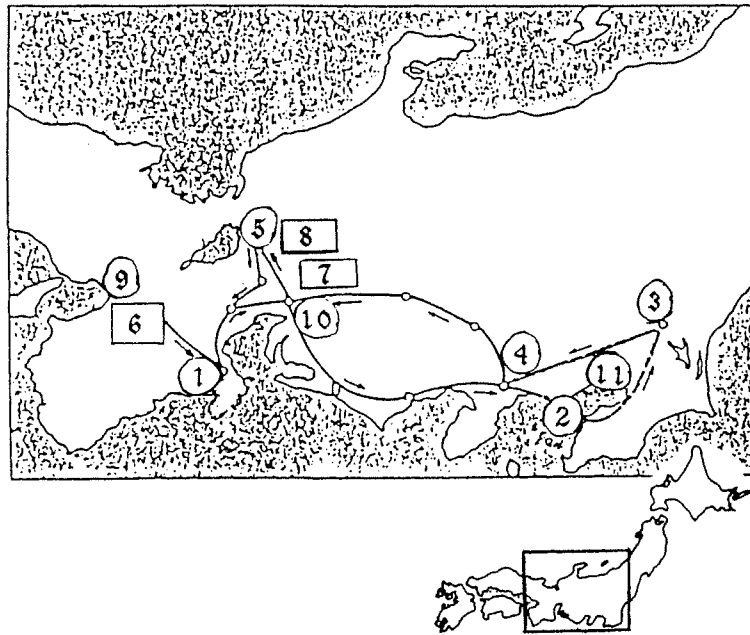
[Emperor Keikō (traditional dates 71-130 c.e.) dwelled in Hishiro Palace at Makimuku (in modern Nara Prefecture). By his various consorts and concubines he had eighty children; second and third among them were Prince Oh-usu ("Big Mortar") and his younger brother Prince O-usu ("Little Mortar").]

There were two sisters named Ehime and Otohime, the daughters of a provincial lord. Having learned by report that they were beautiful, the Emperor sent his royal son Oh-usu to fetch them to the palace. But instead of bringing them to the palace, Oh-usu secretly married them himself; not only that, but he found two other women, falsely gave them the names of these two princesses, and presented them instead. The Emperor knew perfectly well that these were not the same women. He gazed long and searchingly at the impostors, refused to wed them, and made them suffer. Oh-usu had a child by Ehime . . . and he also had a child by Otohime. . . .

...

The Emperor said to O-usu, "Why does your elder brother not come to the morning and evening meals? Gently instruct him in his duty." Thus he commanded, but after five days Prince Oh-usu was still absent. Then the Emperor said to O-usu, "Why does your brother still stay away? Can you have failed to teach him his duty?" "I have already taught him," said O-usu. "Early in the morning, when he went to the privy, I lay in wait for him, caught him and crushed him; I tore his limbs off and wrapped them in matting and threw them away."

The Probable Route of Yamato-takeru's Eastern Journey



1. Ise Shrine, where his aunt is priestess.
2. Hashirimizu, where he takes a boat across the strait and his consort drowns herself.
3. Mount Tsukuba.
4. Ashigaru Pass, where he kills the deer.
5. Mount Ibuki, where he becomes ill.
6. The land (country, province) of Yamato, his homeland.
7. The land of Owari, where he marries Princess Miyazu.
8. The land of Minu (in modern Japanese, Mino).
9. Modern Osaka.
10. Modern Nagoya.
11. Modern Tokyo.

How Yamato-takeru got his name

The Emperor became alarmed at the ferocity of his son's disposition. He therefore said to him: "In the West [i.e. Kyushu] there are two heroes of Kumaso, unsubmissive and disrespectful men. Go capture them!" At the time, O-usu's hair was still bound up at the brow [in the manner of a youth of 14 or 15]. His aunt Yamato-hime gave him her upper garment and her skirt, and with a saber hidden in his bosom he went forth.

When O-usu came to the dwellings of the Kumaso heroes, he saw that armed men were surrounding the houses three deep. A new building was being added to the encampment, and the people were talking about the feast they would have in celebration and preparing the food. He strolled about the neighborhood, awaiting the day of the feast. When the day came, he loosened his hair and ornamented it in the female fashion, and he put on his aunt's clothes. He looked just like a young girl. Mingling with the women, he went into the new building.

The two Kumaso heroes, who were brothers, took a fancy to the pretty maiden; they seated her between them, and all grew even merrier. When the feast drew near its height, O-usu took the saber from his bosom and, catching the older man by his collar, thrust the blade through his chest. The younger man ran out in terror. O-usu ran after him and caught him at the foot of the steps. Grabbing him by the skin of his back, the prince rammed the saber through his buttocks. The Kumaso said, "Do not move your sword; I have something to say to you." O-usu gave him a moment's respite, while continuing to hold him prostrate. "Who are you?" the man asked. "I am the son of him who dwells in the palace of Hishiro at Makimuku and rules the Land of the Eight Islands; my name [one of his several names] is Prince Yamato-oguna. Hearing that you two Kumaso are unsubmissive and disrespectful, His Majesty sent me to capture and slay you." "Truly spoken!" said the Kumaso hero. "In the West country there is none stronger and more heroic than we, but in great Yamato there is one who has proved more heroic still. Therefore I shall offer you a name: from this time forward, be known as Prince Yamato-takeru, the Hero of Yamato." As soon as he finished speaking, the prince split him up like a ripe melon. Henceforward, Prince O-usu was called Yamato-takeru no Miko ("Prince"). On his way back to the capital, he conquered and pacified mountain deities and river deities, and deities of the straits as well.

The prince slays the Izumo hero

Then he went to the land of Izumo. He wanted to kill the Izumo hero, so as soon as he arrived, he became close friends with the man. He secretly made a false sword out of yew wood and girded it on. The two friends went together to the river Hi to bathe. Yamato-takeru came up from the river first and girded on the sword which the other had taken off. "Let us exchange swords," he said. When the Izumo man came up out of the river, he for his part girded on the false sword. "Come, let us joust," said Yamato-takeru. Each drew his sword, but the Izumo hero could not even get his out of its scabbard, and Yamato-takeru cut him down. Thereupon, Yamato-takeru made this song:

Alas that the sword of the Izumo hero, its sheath vine-
wound, Should have no true blade!

Having thus subdued these unruly men, Yamato-takeru returned to the capital and made his report to the Emperor.

His campaign in the East country

Yet again, the Emperor commanded him: "In the twelve countries to the East there are savage deities and unsubmissive men; go and subdue them." The Emperor gave him as companion Prince Sumitomo-mimitake, ancestor of the lords of Kibi, and bestowed on him a spear eight spans long, made of holly wood. Upon receiving the imperial command, he started off. First he went to the shrine of the great deity at Ise, the imperial shrine, to worship, and there he again spoke to his aunt Yamato-hime, the priestess. "His Majesty must want me to die, for he sent me to strike down the evil men of the West, and no sooner had I returned to the capital than he sent me off again. Now, without giving me an army, he sends me to pacify the evil men of the twelve circuits of the East. The more I think of it, the more I am convinced that he intends for me to die." As he departed, weeping and grieving, his aunt gave him the sword Grass-Mower, and she also gave him a bag, saying "If you are in great danger, open the bag."

When he came to the country of Owari, he went into the house of Princess Miyazu, the ancestress of the rulers of Owari. He wanted to make her his bride, but then he decided he would wed her upon his return. They exchanged vows, and he continued on his way to the East country, variously subduing all the savage mountain and river gods and unsubmissive peoples whom he encountered.

Next, he came to the country of Sagamu. Its ruler deceived him, saying: "In the middle of this moor is a lake, and in the lake there lives a deity who is extremely ferocious." Yamato-takeru entered the

moor to see the deity, whereupon the ruler set fire to the moor. Knowing that he had been tricked, the prince opened the the bag which his aunt had given him and saw inside it a fire-drill. First he used his sword¹ to cut and clear the grass, and then he used the fire-drill to set a counter-fire; and then he returned to the ruler of Sagamu and slew him and all his adherents, and burned them all up. And that is why the place is now called Yakitsu ("Fire-Ford").

From there he continued on. As he was crossing the Hashirimizu ("Running Water") sea, the god of the straits raised waves and tossed his ship so violently that he could not go on. His consort, Princess Ototachibana, said: "I will enter the sea as a sacrifice in your Highness's stead. You must complete the mission on which you were sent and return to the Emperor with your report." When she was about to enter the sea, she spread eight thicknesses of sedge, eight of sealskin, and eight of rough silk on the waves and seated herself upon them. The rough waves calmed themselves, and the prince's ship was able to proceed. And thereupon, this consort sang:

Ah! you who called to me, asked after me,
As I stood in the midst of the flames
Of the fire on Ono moor in Sagamu.

Seven days later, the consort's comb floated to the water's edge. The comb was taken, and a burial mound was constructed into which it was placed.

Yamato-takeru penetrated further eastward, subduing all the savage Emishi and also pacifying the savage deities of the mountains and rivers. On his way back to the capital, he came to Ashigara Pass. Just as he was eating his provisions of dried rice, the deity of the pass came up to him in the shape of a white deer. He intentionally struck the deer with a piece of a wild garlic plant left over from his meal, and it hit the deer right in the middle of an eye and killed it. After that, Yamato-takeru climbed to the top of the pass. He stood there and wailed three times: "Oh my wife!" (*azuma ha ya*). And thus the East country is called Azuma.

A poetic interlude

Then he crossed over from this country into Kai. While he dwelled in a palace at Sakaori, he made this song:

How many nights has it been
Since I passed Niibari and Tsukuba?

Whereupon an old man who kept the watch-fires lit made a verse in continuation:

Counted day by day—
 Of nights, nine
 Of days, ten.

Yamato-takeru praised the old man for his ready response and made him ruler of the East country.

Yamato-takeru takes Princess Miyazu to wife

From that land he crossed over into the province of Shinano and subdued the deity of Shinano pass. Then he returned to Owari, where on a previous day he had promised to marry Princess Miyazu, and entered her house. There was a great feast, and Princess Miyazu herself offered Yamato-takeru the great saké cup. The hem of her mantle bore the stain of her monthly defilement, and when he saw this, he made the following song:

Your arm—
 White and slender as the white bird's head
 That crossing eternal, heavenly Mount Kagu
 Sparkles like a sharpened scythe—
 That delicate arm I would make my pillow;
 But though I think to sleep,
 On the hem of the robe you wear
 The moon has come out.

She made a song in reply:

Listen, my lord,
 Peacefully ruling
 Grandson of the high-shining sun:
 The years have come and passed,
 The moon and months have come and gone;
 Must it not be that, as I anxiously waited,
 Upon the hem of the robe I wear
 The moon came out?

Then they joined in marriage. Yamato-takeru left his sword Kusanagi with Princess Miyazu and went forth to conquer the deity of Mount Ibuki.

Yamato-takeru's final adventures and death

Upon reaching Mount Ibuki, he declared that he would take the deity of this mountain bare-handed. As he was climbing the mountain, he encountered a white boar on the mountainside. The boar was as large

as an ox. Then he spoke aloud: "This must be the messenger of the deity, transformed into a boar. I won't kill it now, but I'll kill it on the way back," and he continued his climb. The mountain god poured down hail, which struck him and stupefied him. [An old commentary says: this white boar was not the deity's messenger but the deity himself, in his proper form, and it was because Yamato-takeru spoke aloud (a magically dangerous thing to do) that the deity caused him to be stupefied.] When he reached the clear spring at Tamakurabe and sat down to rest, he recovered a little. And that is why this clear spring is called Isame ("Sit and Wake Up") spring.

From there he went forth, and when he had reached the vicinity of Tagi moor he said, "Within my heart, I have always felt as though I might soar like a bird, but now my very legs will not walk: they are swollen and bowed." And that is why this place is called Tagi ("Bowed"). From there he walked only a very little farther on; sick and weary, he leaned on a stick and walked a little farther. And that's why that area is called Tsuetsuki ("Stick-Leaning") Pass. He came to the foot of a lone pine tree on the cape of Otsu, and he found a sword which he had lost there at an earlier time, when he had paused to eat a meal. The sword was preserved unharmed, and he made this poem about it:

O pine on the cape of Otsu
Across from Owari,
O pine on the cape of Otsu
If you were a man
I would gird this sword on you
And clothe you—
O pine.

From there he went to the village of Mie, and he said, "My legs are swollen like thrice-folded cakes. I am sick and exhausted." That is why the place is called Mie ("Three-Fold"). From there he went on, and when he came to Noba moor, he was seized with longing for his home country, and he made this song:

Yamato—
Best of all lands—
Many times around
Green-fenced,
Mountain-hid,
Yamato the fair.

And he also sang

Let you whose lives
Are untroubled
Thrust in your hair
Leaves of the great-oaks
That grow on Mount Heguri—
You there.

These two songs are “songs-about-the-homeland.” And he also sang

Oh, how longed-for:
From my home
Clouds float up.

This is a “partial song” [because it has only three lines]. And as his illness now became rapidly more grave, he sang

Oh, my great sword
That I left at the maiden’s bedside—
That great sword, alas!

No sooner had he finished this song than he passed away. Messengers on swift horses were sent to the Emperor with the news.

The prince’s consorts and children, who were in Yamato, all went down to the place where he had died and built a burial mound there. And they crawled about in the neighboring paddy fields, wailing aloud their grief. And they made this song:

Oh, the yam vines
That twist and creep
Amidst the rice-stalks
Amidst the rice-stalks
In the fields next door.

Then Yamato-takeru changed into a great white bird and, mounting high in the sky, flew toward the shore. His wives and children lacerated their feet on the stubble of the cut bamboo but forgot their wounds as they ran after him, weeping and grieving. And they sang this song:

On the plain the small bamboo
Seizes us at the hips;
We cannot go through the air—
No help for it but to go by foot.

And then they went into the sea, and struggling to press forward, they sang

The sea, when we enter,
Seizes us at the hips;
Rootless weeds
Upon the sea
We drift about.

And when the bird flew up and perched on the rocks, they sang

The shore bird
Does not go by the shore
But follows the rocks.

These four songs were sung at his interment. And so, even today, these songs are sung whenever an emperor is interred.²

Thence, the bird flew to Shiki in the province of Kawachi and stopped to dwell there, and so his wives and children built a burial mound in that province to enshrine him. And that is why this burial mound is named the White Bird Tomb. But then once again he flew away, soaring up into the sky. . . .

[The story ends with a listing of his descendants.]

NOTES

1. This sword ("grass mower") is the one that Susanowo found in the dragon's tail; see the previous *Kojiki* selection.
2. Throughout the story Yamato-takeru, though a prince, is referred to in honorific language ordinarily reserved for an emperor.