

Space and the Gods of Space in Japanese Myths

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Abstract. This article focuses on the concept of space and two different structures of space in the mythological chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. It considers two main invisible divine gods of space, probably connected to Chinese mythology and appearing in the mythological chronicles first – *Ame-no-minaka-nushi* and *Kuni-no-tokotachi*. It traces their evolution in history and also deals with obtaining by some of Japanese gods, within the Buddhist worldview, a fantastic appearance and the key role in cosmogenesis. It also deals with the connection of the first verbal descriptions of the appearance of the Japanese lands as a living creature or a symbolic thing seen from above with the ritual of “viewing the realm” (*kunimi*), and also with a technique of Chinese-Japanese painting wherein an object is portrayed as seen from above (for the purpose of which, in the cases of indoor scenes, a building is depicted without a roof), etc.

Keywords: space, *kami* deities, *kunimi* ritual, map and *vajra*.

In the 8th century, when the groups of *literati* began to compile mythological chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, as well as the local gazeteers *Fudoki* (“*Reports on customs and features of various lands*”), they started with a primary categorization of space and the fixation of the stages of its exploration.

This type of activity – classification of space of the universe – probably is the common starting point of any mythological narrative. The first act of creation of the cosmos from chaos is the division of the indefinite-being into heaven and earth, after which the creation of separate elements of the world begins. This action means nothing other but filling undefined space with proper nouns, if we view the process from the point of constructing a narrative. These names, first, theonyms, and then toponyms, appear in Japanese mythological texts as such, without characteristics or descriptions, that is, their mythological meaning is represented by these names themselves. And these first lexemes can be considered simultaneously proper nouns and common nouns, as, according to the meaning of the parts of the name, they provide a description of its bearer, in other words, provide a brief story about him; a name per se becomes a wrapped-up, an embryonic form of narrative about the personage.

Many of these proper nouns combine the functions of both theonyms and toponyms, that is, the name of a deity and the name of the place which the deity occupies can coincide. According to Yamaori Tetsuo, “spatialization” (空間化, *kūkanka*) of deities becomes, in the course of time, a general tendency. For example, in *Engishiki*, one can see such naming method as a “god dwelling in Asuka,” “god dwelling in Sumiyoshi”, etc. “Instead of a mythological plot about the inner essence of a deity, we have here spatial distribution, or spatial unfolding of gods” [Yamaori 1999, p. 83]. It is a known fact that space, generally speaking, is explored by humans earlier than time. Accordingly, we can see that in many world languages words connected to temporal dimension often use spatial characteristics, such as “long”, “short”, or, in Japanese, *nagai* and *mijikai* (about time). Meanwhile, in Japan, the mythologemes of topoi, the names of places have always had increased significance and frequency.

First of all, let us mention two rather abstract deities, who, in both mythological chronicles, are more astrological symbols than specific types of gods, even if they appear in the chronicles first. These gods and concepts were definitely borrowed from Chinese books. But this is not so important, as the authors of the chronicles composed the

cosmological ideas and mythological narratives known to them into a certain composition, satisfactory for their time, and they deemed it necessary to not only include these gods in the cosmological history of both chronicles, but also to begin with them. As we know, borrowing is, generally speaking, not a vice, but, rather, a general law of existence of motives, stories, and texts. For example, the story of Izanaki and Izanami, as well as many others, was also not invented in the Japanese Islands; it can be encountered in many areas, even though, in every culture, they obtain their own peculiar characteristics.

Thus, both the first deity whose name is mentioned in the *Kojiki* and the first deity in the *Nihon Shoki* have it as their goal to define a spatial area or an important point in the world. In *Kojiki*, this is Ame-no-Minaka-nushi, or, as B. M. Chamberlain translated it in the first edition of his translation of *Kojiki* in 1882, Deity Master-of-the-August-Centre-of-Heaven.¹ The next translation, by Donald L. Philippi (1969), has it just as “Heavenly Awesome Lord Deity”.² In *Nihon Shoki*, the first one is Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto, or, as translated by W. G. Aston,³ Land-eternal-stand-of-august-thing.

It seems rather important to trace the zone where these two deities are born/become/appear into the world. It is here, it seems, that one can observe one more substantial difference between the spatial structure of the world in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* (by saying “one more”, we mean that, for example, in the works by Kōnosshi Takamitsu, the fundamental differences between these two chronicles have already been postulated – such as the difference in their cosmologies; in *Kojiki*, there is *musuhi*, the birthing life force, and, in *Nihon Shoki*, it is *yin* and *yang* [Kōnosshi 1995]).

¹ [Chamberlain (trans.) 1932], <https://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/kj/index.htm>. For Russian translation, see [Kodziki 1994, Vol. 1]. [Kodziki 1994, Vols. 2-3].

² [Philippi (trans.) 1969], *The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters*: vdoc.pub

³ [Aston 1896], <https://archive.org/details/nihongichroniclooastogoog> For Russian translation, see two volumes of [Nihon Shoki 1997].

There is, however, evidence to suggest that the two chronicles differ in their concepts of space as well.

The first god from the *Kojiki*, Ame-no-Minaka-nushi, the Deity Master-of-the-August-Centre-of-Heaven, is born in the Takama-no-hara, i.e., the Plain of High Heaven.⁴ Both the name of the god and the name of the plain use the word *ama/ame*, “heaven”, which is denoted by the character 天. After that, the text says that all later gods up to Izanaki and Izanami appeared consecutively following Ama-no-Minaka-nushi. One has to assume, therefore, that all of them started their activities in the same place, the Plain of High Heaven, as there are no other indications. Moreover, there is no other place for them to appear, as, at this point, Izanaki and Izanami have not yet been introduced in the narrative, that is, have not gone around the pillar, and have not created Onogoro-shima yet. Moreover, we have to accept that even the gods with such earth-like sounding names as Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto – Earthly-Eternally-Standing-Deity, Uhijini-no-kami – Deity Mud-Earth-Lord, and, following him, Suhijini-no-kami – Deity Mud-Earth-Lady; after her, Tsunugui-no-kami – Germ-Integrating-Deity, and, after him, Ikugui-no-kami – Life-Integrating-Deity; after her, Oo-tonoji-no-kami – Deity Elder-of-the-Great-Place, etc., that all these gods had came into existence before Izanaki and Izanami created the solid earth, that means their connections with Heaven.

Such is the case in *Kojiki*, while, in *Nihon Shoki*, Takama-no-hara plays no special role and can only be encountered once or twice, not even in the main narrative, and in *Kogoshūi* it is only mentioned incidentally. In *Nihon Shoki*, we can observe not a dual, but a triple spatial structure. So, where, according to *Nihon Shoki*, was Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto,

⁴ Some scholars suggest that Takama-no-hara is a real place. The variants of its location are: 1) one of the mountains of the Yamato country near Nara; 2) a mountain in Kyushu, in the Takachiho area of the Miyazaki Prefecture, where Ninigi-no-mikoto descended to earth; 3) also Kyushu, but an area in the present-day prefectures of Fukuoka and Kumamoto; 4) Mount Fuji, etc.

the bearer of the first proper name in this text, the August-thing standing eternally on a certain foundation (*toko/soko*) of the country, born? It turns out that, in the passage dedicated to him in this chronicle, he is born not in heaven and not on earth, but in a certain space between these two, 天地之中. The main narrative of *Nihon Shoki* about the beginning of space-time says: “It is said that when the opening [of Heaven and Earth] (開闢) began, the land/soil floated about like a fish on the surface of the water. And at this time a certain thing has appeared between Heaven and Earth. Its form was like a reed-shoot. Now the thing became transformed into a God. His name is Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto.” [Nihon Shoki 1997, p. 115].

The sixth variant of the same narrative about the beginning of the world in *Nihon shoki* mentions this third, intermediate space between heaven and earth twice: “In one writing it is said: ‘...when Heaven and Earth first separated, a certain thing went in existence. It resembled a reed-shoot. It was born in the Void [between Heaven and Earth] (於空中). This thing changed into a God, who was called Ama-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto.’ [...] And one more thing existed. It resembled floating oil and was born in the Void [between Heaven and Earth] (於空中). The thing transformed to God, by the name of Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto.” [Nihon Shoki 1997, p. 116] That is, these two deities, who represent, respectively, Heaven and Earth, were both born in this third sub-space, in the void between Heaven and Earth. In *Kojiki*, this sub-space is absent.

These two spatial gods, Ame-no-minaka-nushi and Kuni-no-tokotachi, were for a long time not used in culture, remaining abstract concepts. In *Engishiki Shimmeichō*, a register of the names of gods of the *Engishiki* code, a shrine of Ame-no-minaka-nushi is not mentioned, and neither is one of Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto, even though scholars are trying to reconstruct the location of its shrine. However, centuries later, Ame-no-minaka-nushi becomes a popular object of folk worship, and this is how it happens: in Tang China, the Daoist cult of the Ursa Major constellation and the Pole Star was incorporated into Buddhism and linked to the Bodhisattva

Myōken-bosatsu,⁵ who is named the Bodhisattva of the Pole Star in the Chinese translations from Sanskrit of the 4th–5th centuries. These beliefs reached Japan as early as in the 7th century, under Emperor Tenchi. In the Heian period they were banned for some time, and later, in the Edo era, Hirata Atsutane identified Myōken-bosatsu with Ameno-minaka-nushi. In the Meiji years, during the establishment of the State Shinto, all Buddhist temples of Myōken-bosatsu became Ameno-minaka-nushi shrines. Therefore, a millennium and a half after the written fixation of its name, this deity gained a place of worship for the first time, and, in the State Shinto of 19th century, it started to symbolize the centrifugal principle of the cosmos.

As for Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto, he started to be worshipped much earlier, in the Kamakura era, as a part of the Shinto-Buddhist intermixture of *kami* deities and buddhas. He is not merely a name and an abstract designation of a place, but, in *Nihon Shoki*, he even gives birth to several deities. In the medieval times, he unexpectedly obtained a key role in the act of first creation, as well as a surprising appearance. The Muromachi era Buddhist text “Excerpts of Dust and Thorns” (塵荊抄, *Jinkeishō*, 1482, Scroll 6) says: “A question: who is called the seven generations of heavenly gods? – Answer: The first [god] is Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto. He is also called Awanagi-no-mikoto. A deity who has three faces, six hands, and six legs, of blue-black color and akin to a deity-dragon 竜神” [Hara 2017, p. 273]. According to *Sumiyoshiengi*, he has eight heads, eight hands and legs, and he looks like a giant serpent and is called the first of the heavenly deities (天神). Generally speaking, in medieval texts the deities from mythological chronicles undergo striking metamorphoses. In the Buddhist treatise “True Record of Noble Names” (日諱貴本紀, *Nichiiki Hongi*, 14th century), gods are given physical characteristics, sometime fantastical ones – for example, some have several hands, or three eyes and six fingers. Amaterasu turns out to be an androgyne: she has two sets of organs (具), and she combines

⁵ Sanskr. Sudarśana. He is attributed the connection with one of the brightest stars of the Ursa Major, named Alkaid, or Benetnasch.

in herself a man and a woman. All of this is said against the background that, in the mythological chronicles, all these deities have no appearance and can, in fact, be considered invisible. Yamaori Tetsuo writes: “The gods figurating as personages in the mythological part of the chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are given names, but not bodies. These names are highly significant, but gods have no individuality. Even if some have it, it happens very rarely and in the weakest form” [Yamaori 1999, p. 85]. He adds that this feature of the Japanese gods becomes even more obvious, if compared with the gods of Ancient Greece, who have a certain appearance and individual attributes.

There is one more interesting aspect to this. In the same treatise *Nichūiki Hongi*, the information about the height of various deities is given. In particular, it is said that Susanoo-no-mikoto is 9 *shaku* 6 *sun* tall [Hara 2017, p. 273], that is, two meters or more, depending on the specific value of these units of length (originally Chinese). And it seems quite remarkable that the same height is mentioned by Sima Qian in his *Shiji* (“*Records of the Grand Historian*”) as that of Confucius. It is said that “Confucius was nine *chi* and six *cun* tall, he was called a giant and he was different from other people”. (孔子長九尺有六寸，人皆謂之「長人」而異之。)⁶ The similarity of the height of Susanoo in a medieval Japanese treatise and Confucius in Sima Qian’s work has not been noted in academic literature yet, but I think it to be significant and not at all accidental.

The above-said quotations testify about the fact that in the new historical context the invisible Japanese gods began to acquire an appearance, in some cases the fantastical one. And they soon proceed to the next stage – to obtaining a new role in the renewed world creation myth.

In the *Keiran shūyōshū* (溪嵐拾葉集, “*Collection of Leaves Gathered by Storms in the Valley*”, 14th century), a treatise of enormous length, one can find the following story about the beginning of the world: Kuni-no-tokotachi dipped his sacred spear in the primordial water but found no

⁶ Shiji: 世家: 孔子世家 – Chinese Text Project (ctext.org)

country (land) there. Then he started to grope in the water with his spear and, on the very bottom, found 三輪 – three rings emitting golden light [Hara 2017, p. 274].

The *setsuwa* collection *Shasekishū* (沙石集, “Sand and Pebbles”), composed by Buddhist monk Mujū in the period between 1279 and 1283, also speaks about the discovery of Buddhist symbols on the bottom of the sea in its first chapter, “*On the Affairs of the Great Ise Shrines*” (太神宮御事, *Daijingū-no onkoto*). According to it, it is not Izanaki and Izanami who searches for land in water with a spear (as we know from *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*), but goddess Amaterasu, and she finds there a Buddhist omen. This also happens in the very beginning of times, when solid earth has not formed in the ocean yet. Moreover, in this story, Amaterasu saves Buddhism from the evil demon of the sixth heaven Mara (Japanese – *Temma*), who always tries to prevent people from obtaining Buddhist enlightenment and who appears to undermine the establishment of the law of the Buddha in Japan even before the country was created.

This remarkable story about a direct contact between Amaterasu and a representative of the Buddhist pantheon goes as follows: “In the middle of the Kōchō years⁷, one priest who was on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the great goddess explained why, in this shrine, the words “Three Jewels”⁸ are forbidden, and Buddhist monks never approach the sacred hall and do not make pilgrimages there. This is how it happened: in the times when this country did not exist yet, [having learned that] on the bottom of the great sea there is a seal with the sign of Dainichi,⁹ the great goddess dipped a spear [into water] and stirred with it. And when the drops from this spear became like dew [apparently this means that they dried and became solid – *L. E.*], the king-demon of the sixth heaven looked about the expanse and said:

⁷ 1261–1264.

⁸ A reference to the Buddhist Triratna: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

⁹ This seal of Dainichi (Mahavairocana), according to other texts of the same time, has the appearance of three rings.

“This drop will become a country, there, the teaching of the Buddha will spread, and, from this, human morality, life, and death will grow.” And then he descended to obstruct [the goddess] and prevent it from happening. And the great goddess faced him and said: “I will never even pronounce the words “Three Jewels”. And they will not approach me. Now, you shall immediately return to the heaven.” And she started to do [the creation of the country], and he returned to the heaven. “From now on, this promise shall not be broken,” – the goddess ordered. [Since that time,] Buddhist monks do not approach this shrine, and no sutras can be seen on the altar, and the words “Three Jewels” are not pronounced. And the Buddha is called here *tachisukumi* (“he who is standing still”), sutras – *somegami* (“dyed paper”), monks – *kaminaga* (“long hair”, or “long-haired ones”), a Buddhist monastery – *koritaki* (“smoking incense”). Thus, even though, on the outside, [the great goddess]¹⁰ is separated from the Buddhist law, on the inside, she worships the Three Jewels, and so it is clear that, in our country, the Law of the Buddha is flourishing due to the patronage of the great goddess.¹¹

In this extraordinary story, it turns out that even the prohibitions on all things Buddhist in the Ise shrines were, it turns out, established by goddess Amaterasu in the name of Buddhism. Besides, Amaterasu is pronounced the demiurge god who created Japan in the middle of the primordial ocean.

¹⁰ We made this conjecture because the verb in this phrase is accompanied by the polite auxiliary verb *tamau*, which can apply either to the emperor, or to gods.

¹¹ <https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00012949#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=3&r=0&xywh=-1%2C-141%2C5162%2C4424>, images 4-5.

In English, this text exists as a commentated translation by Robert E. Morell (1986), in Russian by N. N. Trubnikova (2017), but for the present study we used a manuscript version of the Japanese source, which is currently stored at Kyoto University library and which has several differences from both translations.

However, from the myths of *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, we know that it was neither Kuni-no-tokotachi nor Amaterasu who searched about with a spear in the primordial ocean, but the ancestor gods Izanaki and Izanami. As we see, within the new, Shinto-Buddhist worldview, they were, for some reason, not suitable, and their roles in the act of creation were given to Kuni-no-tokotachi-no-mikoto and Amaterasu. Therefore, in the Buddhist era, Kuni-no-tokotachi, who was initially quite abstract, took Izanaki's role in cosmogenesis; thus, the gods who were mere abstractions at the cosmological stage of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, unexpectedly gained leading roles in the pantheon of *kami* deities.

The fact of Japanese deities obtaining fantastic forms is no less notable. It can probably be explained by the fact that Buddhism in itself carries old elements of Brahmanism and Hinduism. In this relation, one can recall the features of the key gods of Hinduism. For example, Brahma had four heads, four faces, and four hands, and his skin was red; Vishnu was also portrayed with four hands, with blue or black skin; Skanda, the leader of the divine army and the god of war in Hinduism, was portrayed as a young man, often with six heads and twelve arms and legs. Shiva in the form of Ardhanari is portrayed as hermaphroditic, which, it seems, expresses the idea of duality and wholeness, comprehensiveness. One can assume that depictions of this kind reached Japan via China and, in the medieval period, were rethought and transferred to the Japanese gods of the ancient times, even if without corresponding narratives.

Speaking more concretely, one can hypothesize as a possible source the borrowing of frescos of the Dunhuang caves, in particular, Cave 285. There, a depiction of Maheshwara is preserved, dated 5th–8th centuries, and, as scholars believe, this depiction is evidence of the early process of incorporation of Hindu gods in the Buddhist pantheon of Central and East Asia. A constant feature of the iconography of Maheshwara are three different heads: the left one – with a fierce expression on the face, and the right one – a female one, with all three having different color. Besides, it has six hands – the upper two hold the sun and the moon, the middle two hold a bell and an arrow, and the two lower ones are folded on the chest. All these features reflect, in the opinion of researchers,

the Shiva iconography of Northern India [Gallo 2013, pp. 4, 19]. The depictions of Maheshwara with three or five heads can also be found in the Yungang caves (Cave 8), in the Hotan oasis, and in Kizil.

As far as fantastical appearance is concerned, one must also mention the thousand-handed Manjushri on the northern wall of cave 14 in Mogao (the depiction is dated mid-9th – early 10th centuries), as well as the forty frescoes of Dunhuang with the thousand-handed Avalokiteshvara [Wang 2016, p. 82–84]. The name Manjushri, or *Monju-bosatsu* in Japanese, became important in Japanese culture quite early. In one of the medieval treatises on poetics it is even connected to the origin of Japanese *tanka* poetry: the treatise says that the 31-syllable *tanka* song genre was first created under Prince Shōtoku (the legendary propagator of Buddhism in Japan), when Bodhisattva Monju-bosatsu was manifested in Japan [Ermakova 2020, pp. 270–271].

The borrowing of an image motif from the frescos of Dunhuang and similar stops on the Silk Road is not a unique event in Japanese cultural history. One can recall, for instance, a legendary pair – the God of Wind and the God of Thunder with characteristic features. The God of Wind has a scarf on his shoulders, which produces wind (an obvious remnant of the function of the Homeric “bag of winds”). The God of Thunder has a hoop, to the edges of which many small drums are attached in a circular fashion. It is believed that an image of a deity with a bag of winds reached Japan as early as the Nara period, while, in the Kamakura period, wooden statues of the God of Wind and the God of Thunder with the same attributes were added to the interior of the *Sanjūsangen-dō* (“*Thirty-Three Ken Hall*”) in Kyoto. Many Japanese art history scholars believe that the statues of the God of Wind and the God of Thunder in this pavilion are a comical remake of the frescos of Dunhuang Cave 249.¹²

¹² One can see the image of a god of wind with a bag on the reliefs in the Tower of the Winds in Athens (1st c. BCE). Similar images can also be seen in other areas on the way east: in the Hellenic statues of Gandhara, on the coins of the Kushan Empire, and, finally, on fresco in the Dunhuang Cave 249. s.

It would be far from surprising if it turned out that the cave frescos of the same Buddhist monastery in the mountains of Dunhuang also became the example for the construction of the appearance of pre-Buddhist Japanese deities. Incidentally, the images of the gods of wind and thunder were borrowed approximately at the same time when the depictions of ancient Japanese gods with fantastic features appeared.

In other words, as the spirit of the time was changing and as Buddhism and its iconography were increasingly adopted, tradition was changing as well. As B. Faure remarked wittily, though referring to a different subject, but also speaking about the mutations of Japanese gods in the Buddhist contour, "Through Chinese cosmology, irremediably intertwined with Indian, Buddhist, Chinese, and Japanese mythological elements, the basic spatio-temporal structures of the Chinese worldview have served for the creation of a thoroughly Japanese culture, showing, once more, that any tradition implies a forgetting of its origins." [Faure 2005, p. 88].

Now, let us return to the 8th century, to the narratives of the mythological chronicles, and take a look at what happened to space during the next stages of creation after the seven generations of the first invisible gods. We know that Izanaki and Izanami, standing on Onogoro-shima Island, created the country-solid earth: first Awaji Island, then, Toyoakizu-shima, or The Abundant Dragonfly Island, that is, Honshu, then, Iyo Island, or Shikoku, and, after that, Tsukushi, that is, Kyushu. Further on, both chronicles mention other islands, in particular, the islands of Oki and Sado; they are located in the Sea of Japan and denote the furthestmost northern border of the realm, a mythological and a political one. According to *Engishiki* and *Shoku Nihongi*, these islands were the place of exile of conspirers, and Sado Island was the place to which demons of illnesses were expelled during exorcist rites. This is the first description of the territory that was being created and explored, and here, at the end of this episode, a mega-toponym appears for the first time – The Great Country of Eight Islands.

It is notable that the order of creation of the first islands, as well as the meaning of the parts of their names offer meanings on several levels.

First, this is pure cosmogony and cosmology, that is, the description of creation step-by-step of the world and its properties.

Second, this fragment states the direct correlation between the act of creating the lands, as well as the lands themselves, with human body, or a living creature, which is quite a widespread phenomenon in myths of various regions. As *Nihon Shoki* says, Awaji is a placenta island; Iyo Island is called *Iyo-no-futana* in *Kojiki*, which means “Iyo Island With Two Names”, and it is said about it that the island is one in body, but has four faces. About the birth of the islands of Oki and Sado, *Nihon Shoki* says: “Then they gave birth to twins – Oki-no Shima and Sado-no Shima. It happens that regular people give birth to twins, and precisely [the birth of these islands] became an example [for the people] [Nihon shoki 1997, p. 118].” The same correspondence with a living organism is mentioned by *Izumo Fudoki*: “The large body of the province lies with its head to the east and its tail to south-west [Popov 1966, p. 17], and the parts of Izumo country are pulled by a spade, “wide and flat, like the chest of a girl” in the same way as “a fish-spear is plunged into the gills of a big fish” [Popov 1966, p. 19].

Finally, the third level is the created mythological text itself, which is a verbal map or a verbal geographical model. It approximately matches actual geography; the most rational choice of a point of view on the country is the view from above, akin to aerial photography. The idea of the view from above naturally leads us to the famous mythologem of *kunimi*, the rite of “viewing the realm” from the peak of a mountain, the goal of which is the interaction with the “soul of the country,” *kuni-no mitama*, and securing plentiful harvest and prosperity.

In the *norito* prayers, the definition of Yamato is “the country that Amaterasu is viewing in four directions” (*sumegami-ga harukashimasu yomo-no kuni*), and, after that, it is told in detail to which fantastically far limits she can view the country. And the first *kunimi* in mythological chronicles and the description of what exactly a ruler can see from above can be found in *Nihon Shoki*, but its meaning is not very clear: the mythical first emperor Jimmu ascended a hill, viewed the realm, and said: “Ah, what beautiful country I have received! Even though this country

of paper mulberry is narrow, it looks like a curved dragonfly,” and this is where the name *Akizu-shima*, or Dragonfly Island comes from. Izanaki-no-mikoto, when naming the country, said: “Yamato is a country of calm bays, a country of a thousand narrow spears, verily an excellent country of stone rings,” so he said. And god Oo-ana-muchi-no-oo-kami said: “This is a country within a jade fence” [Nihon shoki 1997, p. 194]. Here, like in the beginning of time, we can see the depiction of the country as a living creature, in this case, a dragonfly, or like a certain object, in the not quite clear shape of stone rings, narrow spears, etc.

The view from above – from a mountain or an imaginary height – as a method of visual art is known from as early as pre-Tang China, and, later, in Japan it becomes a habitual instrument of depicting the visible world. Such are the interiors of dwellings with roof removed in *emaki*, for example, in Kamakura era *Ishiyamadera Engi Emaki* (“*Picture Scrolls Telling the Origin of Ishiyamadera Temple*”), where practically all depictions, either of landscapes or of processions of nobles, on screens or in scrolls, are given as seen from above. The view from above persists for a long time, and even now one can see the maps of routes or territories of shrines for pilgrims, so called 絵図, *ezu*, which existed as a genre since the 11th century. In them, there are mountains, shrines, bridges, paths, and human figures moving as seen from a great height. Metaphorically speaking, such map becomes a graphical representation of *kunimi*.

The ancient idea of the country as a living creature or an object is represented in later periods as well. For example, Kamakura era treatises tell us that the legendary Gyōki drew the map of the country as an object, but this time it was a Buddhist object – a *vajra* (独鈷, *dokko*). A map of the country in the shape of a vajra has been already mentioned by L. Dolche, and a map in the shape of a mandala – by E. K. Simonova-Guzenko [Simonova-Guzenko 2018]. Even though, of course, the dating of this map by Gyōki in Kamakura books is not to be believed, the legend itself is notable. In the *Keiran shūyōshū* treatise, the concept of Japan as a vajra is explained by the fact that the three rings found on the bottom are a seal of Dainichi, therefore, the country has the shape of a single-pronged vajra. The treatise corroborates this as follows:

Question: Why is our country said to have the shape of a single-pronged vajra?

Answer: [...] The bodhisattva Gyōki [...] wandered around Japan, determined the boundaries of the country, and opened up fields. [...] At that time he drew what he saw. The shape [of the country] was the shape of a *vajra*. [Dolce 2007, p. 272].

That is, Gyōki not merely took the form a vajra and composed the parts of the country known to him in its shape. He composed them as he had seen them, and a vajra was produced by itself. L. Dolce comments it as follows: “Both the *Keiran Shūyōshū* and the *Bikisho* attempt to distinguish Japan from the other two Buddhist countries by appealing to the hallowed nature of the country. Japan is presented as the emblem of Buddhist practice and in this way it is deemed to have more relevance than India and China: Japan is called the country of the *kami* (*shinkoku*). India is the country where the Buddha was born. China is the country of the Buddha [A]mi[da]. Because Japan is the country of the *kami* therefore this is country where the *kami* lead people in the Buddhist path.” [Dolce 2007, p. 277].

Interestingly, in the vajra-shaped maps of Japan provided in the above-mentioned study by L. Dolce, one can see two types of spatial orientation. If the vajra is placed vertically, the orientation towards the east is used, and then, for example, Ise Bay is to the right of the vajra-shaped country's territory. In the horizontal vajra, orientation towards the south is used, and, in this case, Ise Bay is at the top, in the upper part of the vajra shape.

Most likely, the orientation towards the south is caused by Chinese influence. A. V. Podosinov, referring to A. L. Frothingham, writes that, in China, the southern orientation was prevalent, while the left hand (side) was dominant over the right one, and was considered benign, honorable, and bringing luck and flourishing. According to J. Needham, compass, which was known to the Chinese since the Han dynasty, pointed with its needle not to the north (as was later the case in Europe), but to the south. The compass itself was called a “south-pointing needle,” and this, in the opinion of A. V. Podosinov, supports and explains the conclusion

about the dominance of the southern orientation in ancient China [Podosinov 1999, pp. 57–58].

The choice of the eastern side is, it seems, universally and obviously connected to the sacralization of the east as the direction where the sun rises; this direction has a special place in various palace and folk ceremonies both in China and Japan, especially in rituals connected to matchmaking and marriage. Here, it seems fitting to provide the story of the marriage of Izanaki and Izanami. The chronicles say that, in order to marry, they built a pillar on Onogoro-shima Island and started to go around it towards each other. As a result, they united, but they gave birth to a leech-child. Then they ascended to heaven, and there, heavenly gods explained their failure by the fact that, during the meeting, the woman spoke first. Following the Heavenly gods' directions, Izanaki and Izanami corrected the mistake in the ritual, after which they started to give birth to islands and the rest.

The motif of going around a pillar, or circular movement in a certain direction, can be encountered in many other regions, for example, in Slavic marriage rituals, in cosmogonic myths of the various ethnoses of India, or in legends of other regions of Asia. Ritualistic movements of the groom and the bride from the left to the right, that is, according to the movement of the sun (which was called *posolon'* by Slavs), had a cosmic and magical meaning, and their violation was dangerous. In one of the parallel narratives, the same motif of a primordial couple going around a pillar (or a mountain) can be found in the myths of the Khakas, as well as the Ungin Buryat peoples. There, the union of the primal ancestors also ends up in failure, but for a different reason: they went in the wrong direction in relation to the sun.

Interestingly, Japanese chronicles have no set opinion regarding who should go in the direction of the sun, and who should go against it, and there is even discrepancy regarding this. *Kojiki* says: "Then Izanagi-no-mikoto said: 'Then let us, you and me, walk in a circle around this heavenly pillar and meet and have conjugal intercourse' After thus agreeing, [Izanagi-no-mikoto] then said: 'You walk around from the right, and I will walk around from the left and meet you'". In the main

variant of a similar narrative, *Nihon Shoki* says: “So they made Onogorojima the pillar of the centre of the land. Now the male deity turning by the left, and the female deity by the right, they went round the pillar of the land separately.”

The direction of movement of the bridal couple in these quotes coincides. However, the first variant of this plot provided in *Nihon Shoki* (一書に曰く) says: “They made a vow to go round the pillar of Heaven, and the Male God said: you go round from the left, while I will go round from the right.” [Nihon shoki 1997, p. 118].

It is difficult to consider the mentions of going around the pillar from the left or from the right accidental, as they are to be found both in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, while, in the latter text, this is mentioned twice, with variations. This leads us to assume that they are remnants of a certain proto-narrative, where the cardinal directions played an important role. It is obvious, however, that the magical aspect of going around the pillar in Japanese chronicles is already waning and weakening, and it is for this reason that, in the texts, there are discrepancies about the direction of movement and about who goes from the left or from the right. In the written variants of the story, the birth of an unsuccessful first-born is explained not by a mistake in the orientation of the primordial couple by cardinal directions, but by the fact that the woman, and not the man spoke first. In other words, there was a violation not of a cosmic, but of a social structure and gender hierarchy, which had been already established by the 8th century.¹³

¹³ Here, we leave aside the hypothesis that, in the yet deeper layer of the narrative about the marriage of Izanaki and Izanami and about the birth of the unsuccessful first-born, there might be hidden a myth of the great flood, with the marriage itself being incest of a brother and a sister, the only surviving people in the world. As a result of incest, their first progeny is flawed, and new, proper children are born only after the couple, following the gods' instructions, performs certain rituals. For more details, see [Ermakova 2020, pp. 93–95].

The archaic, in its nature, importance of orientation of a character and its movement in relation to the movement of the sun is nevertheless not lost in Japanese written mythological texts. The relevance of a personage's position in relation to the sun can also be seen in other contexts. Take, for example, a story, which is, *mutatis mutandis*, contained in both chronicles and which tells about the connection between success in battle and a warrior's orientation in relation to the sun. In *Kojiki*, v. 2, Itsuse-no-mikoto, the elder brother of Emperor Jimmu, says: "I am a child of the Sun deity, so it is not right for me to fight facing the sun. This is why my arm is hurt, and the wound was inflicted by a slave of low birth. Now I am going to turn around and attack having the sun at my back". [Kodziki 1994, v. 2, p. 34]. The *Nihon Shoki* says: "The sovereign became sad and, thinking in his heart about various miraculous methods, said thus: 'I am a son of Heavenly gods, and I fight my enemy with my face to the sun. This goes against the Way of Heaven. I should better turn around and retreat, show that I am weak, praise the Gods of Heaven and the Gods of Earth, and, from my back, the Sun Deity will give me strength, and I shall attack, stepping on my own shadow. Thus, even without drawing blood with my sword, I shall certainly prevail over my enemy' [Nihon shoki 1997, p. 179].

The direction of the sun or the eastern direction as a prioritized one is also present in the poetics of *Man'yōshū*: a look directed towards the rising sun, the dawn, or the east, was usually denoted by the verb "see" (*miru*). A look in other directions was denoted by other lexemes: a look at the sunset or moonset – by compound verbs *kaerimiru*, or even *furisakeru* ("to look back", "to turn"): "On the eastern plain The purple dawn is glowing, While looking back I see The moon declining [to the west]." – *himukashi-no no-ni kakiroi-no tatsumiete kaerimi-sureba tsuki katabukinu* [The *Man'yōshū*, 48]. In this way, the ideas of priority of the east and the south, presented in the orientation of the vajra, are verbally manifested in epic myths and early poetry.

* * *

In mythological chronicles, immediately after the act of creation of the islands, a new period starts – connections between specific toponyms are established by means of drawing verbal routes. The establishment of routes in the mythological narratives is a topic deserving separate treatment. Here, I shall note an interesting fact, which characterizes the narrative of *Nihon Shoki*: we know that, in different variants of the same story, personages, mythological motifs, etc. can vary. It turns out that in *Nihon shoki*, in different versions of the same story, the routes of characters can vary as well. Even the very first route – the road Izanaki takes after his escape from the land of darkness Yomi – can serve as an example for this feature, because versions of this story in *Nihon shoki* (“one book says...”) contain various routes and mention different toponyms.

We can probably suggest that all routes of all the personages depicted in the mythological chronicles, together with the toponyms mentioned, create a network of verbal maps which can produce mythological narratives. This network covers the newly created land and the passages to the other world, which are also subject to exploration and demarcation. In other words, we begin to deal with a separate level of narrative, one of toponymic space as a separate autonomous text.

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