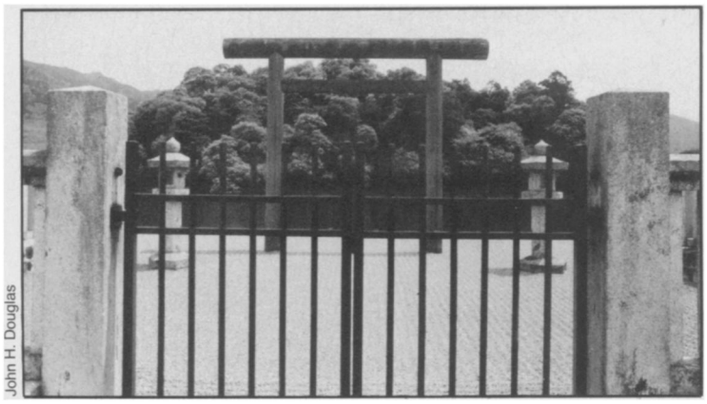
LETTER FROM TOKYO (7):

THE HORSEMEN OF YAMATO

Suggestions that the Japanese Emperor may be descended from mounted Korean conquerors have made archeology a hot political subject

BY JOHN H. DOUGLAS



John H. Douglas

Emperor Sujin's tomb, an artificial hill surrounded by a moat, is one of the imperial graves archaeologists would most like to open.

May you live in interesting times!
— Old Chinese curse

How interesting the times surrounding the fifth century have proved to later historians, but what a curse to have lived then. Around the Roman Empire, barbarian invasions were plunging Western civilization into what would become a half-millenium Dark Age. In the East, the even more powerful Han dynasty of China had crumbled into "The Sixteen Kingdoms" before the onslaught of horsemen from central and northern Asia. But from the ensuing chaos, in a previously remote and underdeveloped archipelago, was launched a potentially powerful new state — the Yamato kingdom of Japan.

A Chinese chronicle compiled in A.D. 297 refers to the inhabitants of the Japanese islands simply as the Wa — literally, "The Little People" — and describes a fragmented political structure of more than a hundred separate tribes, nominally ruled by a female shaman, Queen Himiko (meaning "Sun Daughter"). Scarcely two centuries later, however, by the reign of Emperor Keitai (c. A.D. 507-531), a strong central government had emerged on the Yamato Plain, near present-day Nara, ruled by an aristocracy of horseriding warriors. But where did they come from?

This unanswered question lies at the heart of perhaps the most puzzling and controversial issue facing Japanese historians and archeologists: the origin of the Japanese state and the Imperial Family. The traditional view, encoded in law until after World War II, held that the first emperor was descended from the Sun Goddess, who may be a mythologized version of Queen Himiko. What horses are mentioned in the texts are generally described as coming in tribute from vassal, or at least inferior, states in Korea.

At the other extreme lies the theory first popularized by Tokyo University archeologist Namio Egami, that the horsemen of Yamato were conquerors. They would have been offshoots of the northern barbarians who had overrun China, but who more recently had inhabited the Korean Peninsula, and would have launched their invasion from there.

Even now, the slightest suggestion that Japan's revered and unbroken dynasty of emperors might have Korean ancestors comes as an unspeakable heresy. Relations between the two countries have seldom been good, and ethnic Koreans form what some see as a troublesome minority in modern Japan. Official opposition came swiftly.

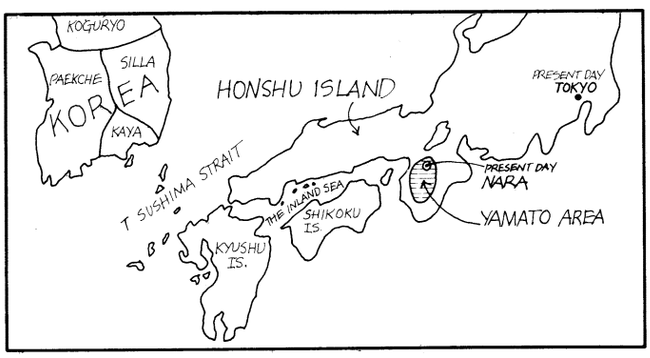
Egami recently told a group of foreign journalists that repeated requests to open ancient imperial tombs have been denied and that, although the Cultural Affairs Agency legally has charge of the tombs, the Imperial Household Agency maintains tight control over them. If they were opened, he says, the tombs would likely reveal a new store of great national treasures and, incidentally, provide evidence to support his theory. But tradition is proving stronger than science.

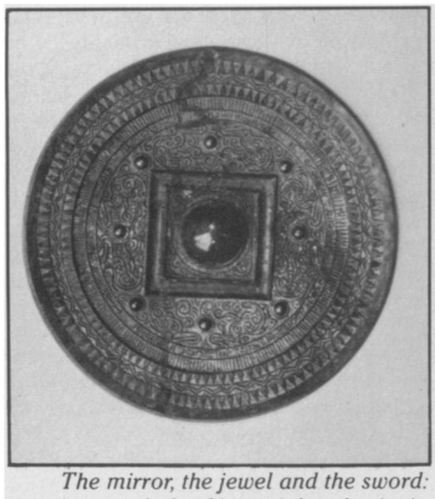
Interestingly enough, Egami has received little support from fellow Japanese archeologists and historians. Having found specific faults with some details of his argument, they have generally shown little interest in pursuing the question further. Rather, it has been American scientists who have led the re-examination of Egami's theory and who are now proposing several intriguing alternatives.

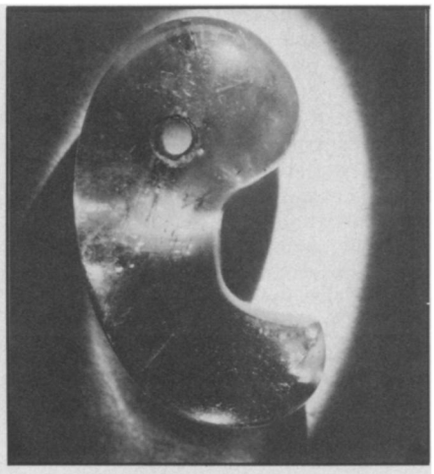
One alternative theory that has received wide attention was recently advanced by Gari Ledyard, associate professor of East Asian Language and Culture at Columbia University. He begins by criticizing Egami for being intentionally vague about just where his invading horsemen came from. Were they Koguryo tribesmen who had overrun northern Korea, or were they from the state of Paekche in southwest Korea, which had been set up by Puyo tribes coming down from Manchuria? "In refusing to be more precise about the Puyo and Koguryo," Ledyard says, "[Egami] neglects the responsibility of fully examining the 'Korean connection' in the origin of the Japanese state."

Ledyard agrees with Egami that the first "Korean" ruler of some Japanese territory (the southern island of Kyushu) was very likely a man later called Emperor Sujin. But Ledyard says there is no evidence that Sujin was either a horserider or a conqueror. More likely, he says, Sujin led a peaceful fourth century migration of ethnic Wa people who apparently lived in the southern Korea area of Kaya. They would naturally have sought safety with their relatives on Kyushu when threatened by barbarians coming down from the north. The "horseriders" then would be Puyo tribesmen who first conquered the Paekche area and eventually began to chase the Wa across the Tsushima Strait.

Were the first "emperors" of Japan descendants of the Sun Goddess, were they horseriding conquerors from the Korean Peninsula, or is there another answer locked in the sacrosanct tombs of the ancient emperors?







The mirror, the jewel and the sword: ancient symbols of imperial authority in Japan. The original regalia (which may not be photographed) were once believed to have been given to the first emperor by the sun goddess, but more likely they date from the fourth to sixth centuries, like the similar objects shown here. The first certain investiture of the regalia came around A.D. 530 with the rise to power of Emperor Keitai, a key figure in the horserider controversy.

By the early fifth century, Ledyard thinks the Puyo had succeeded in pushing northward to the fertile Yamato Valley, under the leadership of a king who was later remembered as Emperor Ojin.

(Ledyard vigorously objects to using purely posthumous names, like Sujin and Ojin, or the title "emperor" for what were clearly regional leaders. However, no alternative designation has yet become widely accepted.)

Ledyard's theory is based largely on a painstaking linguistic analysis of ancient texts, taking into consideration known cultural changes of the time. And archeological evidence gathered without access to the imperial tombs generally supports his sequence of events — up to a point. Everyone agrees, for instance, that during the *early* fifth century (Ojin's time) large numbers of people from the Korean peninsula did come to Japan, bringing with them a multitude of new skills and customs. A dramatic change is seen in pottery, which changes from soft, homemade, low-fired pots to a hard stoneware, known as Sue pottery — fired at temperatures of more than 1,000°C and turned out on wheels by professional craftsmen. And in some early fifth century noblemen's tombs, archeologists have found a *few* trappings associated with horseriding.

But the great burst of horseriding gear and clay effigies (*haniwa*) of horses does not appear in the tombs until the *latter* half of the fifth century. If either Sujin or Ojin were a leader of conquering horsemen, one would expect more horse trappings in tombs from their era. That point forms the basis of criticism leveled at both Egami and Ledyard by J. Edward Kidder, an American archeologist with 20 years' experience in Japan, now a professor at International Christian University in Tokyo.

"Ledyard is off on his timing," Kidder told SCIENCE NEWS. "I think the horseriders came in a second wave of immigrants; there's no strong archeological evidence for horseriders until the *late* fifth century." And the riders need not have come as an invasion force: "I think these people filtered in ... and eventually united and dominated," he says. The pressure for migration would still have come from the chaos sweeping down from northern China, but Kidder believes the refugees escaped in much the same way those from Vietnam have recently — in families and small groups. Nevertheless, they brought with them enough advanced skills to quickly rise to positions of leadership, a rise that parallels the domination of some present-day developing countries by overseas Chinese.

Kidder has also examined the ancient texts and he reaches a very different conclusion from Ledyard: "Ojin is a farmer, not a horserider!" he exclaims with sudden emphasis after describing the early emperor's preoccupation with building ponds and roads. "The *Kojiki* [written in A.D. 712] says that a pair of horses was sent as a gift to Japan's king, either Ojin or a successor, and that he couldn't find anyone to take care of them. They had to get a Korean. If the king were a horseman, he would have had people around him who knew what to do with these animals."

The first emperor described in the texts as actually riding a horse comes two reigns after Ojin, "and the groom holds the bit while he rides," Kidder recalls — hardly characteristic of a warrior horseman. It is not until the end of the Ojin line of kings that one of them is finally described as riding off to do some hunting. But until the tombs of these kings are actually opened, no one can be sure of their true involvement with horses. Says Kidder: "If you open Ojin's tomb and find it full of saddles, I'll take it all back in triplicate."

For Kidder, then, the critical reign in the rise of the horseriders probably is that of Emperor Keitai, at the beginning of the sixth century. Ojin's descendants are split and a "compromise candidate" is brought in. "I feel that Keitai represents the clinching of the state by the horseriders," concludes Kidder. Although Keitai may be distantly related to Ojin, he more likely represents the horseriding immigrants, who by now are ready to assert their power, Kidder says. (Ledyard, on the other hand, thinks Keitai represents local Wa people reasserting their rights after years of subjugation by descendants of Ojin.)

Kidder also disagrees with Egami and Ledyard about the origin of the horsemen. The archeological discoveries from later sites, he says, show strong similarity to artifacts from a relatively backward area on the southeastern coast of Korea, called Silla. Earlier immigrants (like Sujin and Ojin) may indeed have come from other parts of Korea, but the horse trappings and the social structure of the late fifth and early sixth centuries, Kidder says, bear much closer resemblance to those in Silla than to those in either Paekche or Koguryo. Thus the second wave of immigrants — the horseriders — most likely came from Silla. Toward this conclusion, "literature and archeology go hand in hand perfectly by the end of the fifth century," he says.

James Mayger

Egami sees tombs as cultural asset of all peoples.

John H. Douglas

Kidder: Skilled immigrants seized power.

Quite apart from the issue of where the Yamato horseriding nobility came from, several other questions remain concerning the development of Japan's first centralized state. These questions are being addressed by anthropologist Gina Barnes, a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, now working in the

Nara area. "Regardless of who formed the administrative nucleus of a new state organization in Japan," she says, "we would still face the question of how did they do it." She concludes that Japan was already well on its way toward state-level organization before the horseriders took over.

An anthropologist's point of view can almost be considered as exactly opposite that of the historian — a preoccupation with peoples and cultures rather than with individuals and specific events. Thus, regarding the eventual takeover of a horse-riding nobility, Barnes told SCIENCE NEWS: "A single dynastic change would not have had as sensational effect on the formation of the Yamato state as some have made it out to be." One has only to consider the plight of some present-day developing countries, she says, to understand the difficulty of creating a nation-state out of loosely organized independent tribes.

Barnes is now reexamining data from Yamato-area sites with a view toward measuring the three variables considered most important in state formation: demographic changes, increased specialization in crafts and agricultural production, and a progression from towns to cities to state centers. She has found, for example, that craft and agricultural specialization were already well advanced in the early *fourth* century, with pottery making and bead working organized on at least the village level. By the time of Ojin and his line a century later, previous tribal groupings had given way to an administrative system capable of undertaking major public works projects, including irrigation canals, huge tombs, and large-scale importation of iron from southern Korea.

Barnes concludes, however, that although the early Yamato kings had formed a small centralized state, and had pacified their neighbors around the Inland Sea, political unification of the whole of southern Japan was not begun until the sixth century, with Emperor Keitai and his successors. It is only then that one finds population concentrations large enough to be called cities, and evidence for that most characteristic sign of statecraft — a bureaucracy. The rise of the horseriding nobility in the late fifth century, therefore, would only have climaxed development of the Yamato state, not brought it about.

Although the rise of the first Japanese state would be significant enough to attract international scholarly attention in any case, the very importance of current American work on the subject implies a certain criticism of Japanese science, long noted for its rather narrow focus and lack of interdisciplinary cooperation. Barnes notes for example, "the lack of a settlement system concept in Japanese archeology, by which fragmentary data ... can be fitted together to produce a systemic view of culture and cultural change."

Richard Pearson, a professor of anthropology at the University of British Columbia, is far more blunt. "The bulk of Japanese archeological research," he says, consists of "endless detailed analyses of certain artifacts ... usually arriving at no conclusion about the prehistoric society and culture of Japan, or even prehistoric society in general."

Such criticism becomes particularly relevant when Japanese scientific efforts become involved with politics. Namio Egami has even gone so far as to accuse the Imperial Household Agency of "tampering with the tombs" in their efforts to maintain them. A spokesman for the agency replies that "in a strict sense, repair work might contravene the law, but it is being carried on in such a way as not to disturb the cultural properties."

When asked why the Cultural Affairs Agency has not exercised its legal control over the tombs and opened them to scholars, a spokesman for the agency replied: "The law cannot force the scholarly excavation of any kind of Important Cultural Property. Besides, archeology is not in an advanced enough state yet, so digging for treasures in the graves might damage them irreparably. It is probably just as well to keep them underground."

In the Japanese system, such official statements, though inconsistent and apparently extralegal, leave no recourse. Egami, now semi-retired, is left to chat with foreign journalists, eventually to say with a show of emotion uncharacteristic for a Japanese scholar, "The tombs should be viewed as a cultural asset of mankind, not the private graves of one family!" □