CHAPTER ONE

Introducing the Shrine and Dazaifu

I like the shrine best in the early morning, before the crowds press in, even before the priests present themselves at the altar to offer breakfast to the deity. The rising sun is hidden behind the steep height that hems the compound on the right. The light is dim, soft and cool. The only visitors are a few townsfolk who come singly through the towering gate to bow, clap twice, and murmur their prayers. The pigeons go over the ground hunting something they might have overlooked yesterday. Their cooing overlays the silence.

When sunshine spills into the courtyard I move near to the main hall, look in to the closed altar. An altar in some form has stood here since 902. The imposing building that now rises around it is four hundred years old, but it has been well cared for. The gold of its pillars could not have glowed more brightly when it was first applied, the black lacquer glistens, the accents of color are vivid. I pay my respects, whisper my own prayer.

Along the back streets of the old town, I walk along the dike above the polluted stream that tumbles out of the mountains to drain this finger of the valley. In the times I am thinking about, long ago, was this brook clean, I wonder. I like to think it was, but the Japanese have always used their rivers to carry away their refuse. Despite the muck, a pair of white herons make this water their home. They must be hardy. Or short-lived.

I take country roads to avoid the highway and its traffic, pass sign after sign pointing to historic remains, emerge at the site of an institution older than the shrine. But for it the shrine would not have come into being.

A few steps up and away from the thoroughfare is a wide expanse between ridges that embrace it like protective arms. Beyond gently sloping fields rise to the backdrop of a green mountain. On this broad stage once rose the headquarters of a major arm of the government, the only one of its kind, the “distant capital”: Dazaifu.

Dazaifu was here in northern Kyushu because this region was critical. Here, far from the capital, the Japanese islands are closest to the heart of the Asian continent. Northern Kyushu and southern Korea face each other across the Korea Strait, the main route for traffic between the continent and the islands. Northern Kyushu was the gateway to Japan.

Ranged before me are what remains of Dazaifu: almost five hundred boulders set solidly in the earth, hewn to support the pillars of the structures that rose here. The patterns of the stones and the roof tiles that came to light in excavations tell scholars what the buildings looked like.

I stand on the broad stone steps and try to imagine myself here thirteen hundred years ago. The main gate rises two stories above me. I am uneasy, eyed by distrustful sentries at flanking guardhouses, hands on the hilts of their swords, menacing pikes ranged behind them.

I grant myself sufficient status to pass, and face the second gate. Winging out from it are covered corridors that enclose the compound. Through that gate I step into a vast courtyard paved with white sand dazzling in the sunlight (magic in moonlight). The brightness dances off the crimson pillars, the gilded fretwork, the silvery black of the massive tile roofs. This place was calculated to impress: it is fifty yards wide between the pillared pavilions, two on each side, and a hundred yards straight ahead, on a walkway of stones polished smooth in river beds, up more broad steps, to the fifth and greatest hall. From it emerged Dazaifu's Governor General, representative of the emperor, symbol of power and authority, to greet a foreign delegation or the officials from all Kyushu, assembled in this space on state occasions.

Dazaifu had a double responsibility. It was established to keep an eye on foreign lands, which in Japan's world then meant China and Korea: to monitor their activities and their intentions, to receive their envoys when they appeared, to send off Japanese embassies to visit them. The Chinese had been coming, off and on, since at least as early as the first century A.D.: Chinese histories record a return visit to the Chinese court by a Japanese emissary in the year 57; he did not represent the ruler of Japan, which the Chinese called Wa, for there was no such ruler; he came from Na (the Chinese called it Nu), one of the hundred or so belligerent little kingdoms that the Chinese counted in Wa.

The Chinese emperor graciously bestowed on that Japanese visitor of 57 a golden seal signifying his king's right to rule, for the Chinese viewed eastern Asia as their world and the barbarian peoples on its fringes as their dependencies. In 1784 a farmer in the old territory of Na dug a gold seal out of one of his fields. Its ancient characters are taken to read "Vassal King of the Wa country of Na."

There are later records of Chinese embassies to Wa, and of Japanese embassies to China. The Japanese were more than once exposed to the grandeur of the Chinese court and the elaborate ceremonies when that court received the

tribute-bearing representatives of its vassals. The Japanese bridled at that status, but they continued to come, and when time and circumstances made it possible and necessary, they built Dazaifu in Chinese style and on a scale calculated to impress even the Chinese, not to mention the Koreans. Dazaifu was a declaration that Japan too had culture.

Dazaifu's other responsibility was to administer the island of Kyushu. To the Japanese court, far away in the region of Nara, Kyushu was a headache, its people often obstreperous and even rebellious. The problem was handed to Dazaifu, with extraordinary latitude to deal with it. Here taxes were collected in kind and in coin, the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples were supervised, and law and order was maintained--usually.

Some time around five centuries ago Dazaifu ceased to exist; its buildings rotted and crumbled. Some of its foundation stones were filched; they were ready-made building materials. They have been replaced by plastic reproductions that fool my eyes but ring hollow when I stomp on them. Sometimes, stomping, I search them out.

Even the stones that are genuine do not represent the beginning of Dazaifu. They date from a reconstruction a thousand years ago, after a member of the nobility who turned renegade and pirate sacked Dazaifu for its treasure and left its headquarters and its prosperous city in flames. The charred evidence is in a layer of blackened earth two or three feet down, where lie the foundation stones of the buildings he burned. They were rebuilt according to the original design.

Even deeper are the remains of the first structures on this site. No foundation stones--apparently there was no time for substantial construction. What is left are the bases of cedar poles that were stuck into the earth to support a few randomly placed wooden buildings. (I am amazed at how long wood lasts in earth sealed off from air.) It is supposed that those first buildings were construction headquarters for the major fortifications being built: there was a great fear of invasion from the continent.

That emergency grew out of events long before. . . .

CHAPTER TWO
The years: 527 and 528 and the 660s

Principal characters
Iwai, powerful chieftain of northern Kyushu
His son
Arakabi, general of the Mononobe clan, leading the army of the Yamato coalition

On a ridge about twenty miles south of Dazaifu there is a tomb, an ancient pile of earth whose rounded head and angular base give it the shape of a huge old-fashioned keyhole. The same shape is found elsewhere in Japan: prodigious mounds, memorials to rulers of the fifth and sixth centuries.

This one dates from the early sixth century, and my friend the archeologist Kamei Meitoku has brought me to see it. For nearly fifteen centuries the elements have worn away at it but its tree-covered slopes still rise sixty feet above us. The base of the keyhole is a hundred yards wide, the overall length is almost a hundred and fifty yards, the round is sixty-five yards in diameter; a football field would rattle around inside.

Walking the perimeter, we are kept from encroaching by a moat, dry today but wide and deep. Beyond the moat is a ledge, several feet deep; it is empty but Kamei says that once it held ranks of figures standing guard against double danger: malicious spirits and natural erosion. Some of those figures were the lively clay images around two feet tall called *haniwa*: warriors in armor, horses with saddles and trappings, mounted warriors; farmers with hoes, singing women, houses, granaries; chickens and dogs and monkeys. They stood firm, their hollow bases sunk into the ground. That was their origin: tiles embedded to slow the earth's washing away; but the craftsmen making them grew bored with such simple objects and began to sculpture the tops.

An eighth century chronicle gives a fanciful explanation for haniwa. It says that in the distant past when a great personage was buried his personal attendants were assembled and, to insure that they would be present to serve their lord in the next world, were all buried alive in the precincts of the tomb, upright, with only their heads above ground. “For several days they died not, but wept and wailed day and night. At last they died and rotted. Dogs and crows gathered and ate them.” Finally a merciful emperor decreed that thereafter men of clay should be substituted for living men. . . . This is a good story, but there is no evidence that such a thing ever happened in Japan; the tale was lifted from Chinese chronicles.

Clay haniwa were installed at tombs all through Japan, but only in this area did they alternate with figures of stone; Kamei tells me. that were carved from the local volcanic rock.”

We reach a feature that makes this tomb unique. Jutting out from the round toward the northeast (toward the rising sun?) is a spacious terrace, forty- seven yards wide and almost as deep. Here we are confronted by a row of fourteen stone figures, ponderous, hulking.

Kamei recalls the old description of this scene. Early in the eighth century the central government ordered each of the sixty provinces to submit a report on natural resources, geographic characteristics, and oral traditions. A fragment of the report from this province still exists. It concerns this tomb and in part it says: “A stone man stands in judgement before a naked figure prostrate on the ground who is called 'the thief.' At his side are four stone boars which he stole. There are also three stone horses, three stone houses, and two stone warehouses.”

“There are many uncertainties here,” says Kamei. “No other tomb in Japan has a terrace like this, and we can't be sure what it was used for. That eighth- century report calls it 'a place of government' but we don't know that these figures stand where they stood originally or that they represent what the report says they do. A few years ago an exploratory excavation--an X-shaped ditch--uncovered so many haniwa and stone figures that it seems clear that this was a place for some kind of ritual, and that it was occupied by many more than fourteen figures.”

He gives them a critical glance. “These are reproductions, rather poor reproductions. The originals are in museums, some in the collection across the road, one as far away as the national museum in Tokyo.”

Rarely can scholars assert with confidence for whom one of these gigantic tombs was constructed, but here they know. It was built for a powerful chieftain named Iwai. He built it himself, for, like other mighty leaders of the time, he believed that was the only way he could be sure of getting what he wanted. He wanted a tomb exceeding all others on Kyushu because he exceeded all other chiefs. He achieved his goal. Iwai's tomb is the biggest on Kyushu, but it is empty.

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He turned his horse and raised himself in his saddle to survey his army. Mounted swordsmen in front, swordsmen on foot behind them--all tough men with keen blades--and in the rear stout bowmen to fire over the heads of the swordsmen into the ranks of the enemy. He had no fear of the outcome: these men would be

fighting for their homelands. He nodded to his captains ranged before him, lesser chiefs allegiant to him. They had agreed on the plan of battle, no need for more talk. Their flags whipping in the winter breeze, they cantered back to their positions, each in front of his own men.

His son remained at his side. This would be his first battle and he prayed not to disgrace himself--he knew he lacked his father's fire. He found his father looking into his eyes, expressing more faith in him than he felt in himself. He tried to look fearless.

The father turned again to face the enemy. He was Iwai, chief of the powerful clan that held this fertile plain, biggest and richest on Kyushu. These fruitful lands watered by the Chikugo River were his base, the source of his wealth and power, but he and his liegemen controlled a vaster territory, the northern two-thirds of Kyushu. And the clans that held southern Kyushu, the rough and untamed part of the island, were his allies. They were the Hayato; when he issued his call to arms they had made quick response; Hayato fighting men were massed alongside his.

As warriors the Hayato were formidable, but they brought something more to the battlefield: an aura of supernatural power. With them was a shaman, a priestess of wizardy, who was now dancing fiercely to put their enemies under a spell. It is written that primal ancestor of the Hayato was given the gift of sorcery by his mother, the goddess of the sea, and because they were a remote and untouched people (some called them barbaric) they had not lost that gift. Many of their warriors wore a crimson scarf over their shoulders, a magic symbol. Seeing those, their enemies were afraid.

Iwai was aware that the Hayato also had a reputation for uncertain loyalty. It did not worry him. They had been steadfast allies in the past and, like his own men, they would be fighting against an intruder.

This battle had been a long time coming. The army confronting Iwai belonged to the clans of Yamato, a plain far to the east, in central Honshu, where eventually the cities of Nara and Osaka and Kyoto would rise. They were many days' march from their homes.

The clans of Yamato had pretensions. They called their chief “king,” claimed that he was the ruler of all the islands. Iwai scoffed. Their former “king,” a notoriously vicious and dissolute character, had died without fathering a child, so womanly a man was he. Their first choice to succeed him had been so terrified when he sighted the escort they sent to conduct him with dignity to their

headquarters that he fled into the hills and hadn't been heard of since. Their second choice and current holder of the title had been plucked from the countryside where he controlled far less territory with far less power than Iwai.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Iwai considered himself peer to the Yamato chief. He would be an ally when alliance was profitable but he was not an underling, not a subject. He would oblige their reasonable requests for assistance but he did not take orders from them. And in recent years they had gone too far.

They should know they were too far away to rule this region, nor did they have the necessary wisdom. And they totally misjudged the situation in the land across the strait. In the chronic warfare over there they persisted in bloody involvement to support the inevitable loser. That was the road to disaster, and he had told them so.

Relations across the strait were close and involved and always had been. A long time ago--twelve or perhaps eighteen thousand years ago--there had been no strait and the Japanese islands were not islands. They and the Korean peninsula were a long peninsular appendage to the Asian continent. The first human beings to set foot on what became Japan walked in.

That was during the Ice Age, when so much of the oceans' water was frozen in massive icecaps at the poles that the rest was far shallower than it is today; much that is now ocean bottom then lay high and dry. Eventually the earth's climate warmed, glacial ice melted, and the oceans rose. The mounting waters washed over lowlands to carve the peninsula into islands. The bridge to the continent disappeared.

That did not stop the people. They crossed in boats, impelled by the ancient urge to find a better place to live. Many came seeking refuge from the wars that swept the continent as nascent empires fought to survive.

The first comers roamed the forests with their weapons of stone, hunting game and gathering berries, nuts, and roots. Confronted by the ocean, they quickly developed an appetite for seafood and left great piles of shells that today are obvious clues to their seaside camps.

Centuries passed. New waves of immigrants brought new ways: tools and weapons of iron and bronze and the techniques of growing rice. Farming forced tribes to settle down in villages but not in peace. Tribes coalesed into clans, clans into little kingdoms that savagely warred on each other. The earliest Chinese who

ventured into this barbaric fringe of their empire counted more than a hundred kingdoms, with “conflict raging on all sides.” By the third century, fighting had narrowed the kingdoms to about thirty. The long process of unification had begun.

The same thing had been happening faster on the Korean peninsula: the strong conquering the weak to form vigorous realms. In the north was a state called Koguryo, strong enough to hold off China in almost constant fighting. The south was divided between Paekche in the west and Silla in the east. These three kingdoms existed in a shifting pattern of alliance and betrayal, at war with each other or plotting war. Wedged between Silla and Paekche along the southern coast was a group of walled towns, small kingdoms in a loose confederation called Kaya. To maintain their precarious independence in the midst of conflict, they played Paekche and Silla against each other, and for leverage against them both they looked across the strait.

Kaya was the home of shipowners and merchants who traded across that channel. On the Kyushu side their counterparts lived in harbor towns along the northern coast. There were intimate ties between the two sides, old relationships, knit by blood and business. The iron ore of the Korean peninsula supplied Japanese forges, and some speculate that the Japanese paid for it by sending mercenary soldiers to bolster Kaya defenses. The Kyushu towns and their seafaring merchants were mostly in Iwai's territory or in the hands of his followers. The traffic made him richer and he aimed to keep it healthy.

Yamato, too, profited, and it assumed a proprietary interest in Kaya, although it was never able to convert claims into possessions. Yamato sent armies that sometimes won battles but mostly lost them; they could not take and hold territory.

For three centuries, ever since its beginnings, Paekche--menaced in the east by Silla, in the north by Koguryo, in the west by China--had cultivated Yamato as an ally. Paekche had much to offer. Like the other Korean kingdoms, it simultaneously feared China and sought its culture but, more than the others, Paekche had soaked up Chinese civilization.

And so Paekche was able to send to Japan envoys bearing gifts of fine art and splendid craftsmanship. It had sent whole communities of sculptors, painters, metal casters, even seamstresses, to teach their arts. The transplanted scholars of Paekche could read and write, skills new to the Japanese; they set up systems to keep track of incoming taxes and what they were spent for. (Iwai granted that this bookkeeping was worthwhile.) They sent men learned in Confucian principles and Chinese ways of government, and Yamato eagerly set about to transform itself on

that model. Now they were transmitting the glories of Buddhism, with assurances that “This doctrine is amongst all doctrines the most excellent. . . . [It] can create religious merit without bounds. . . . Every prayer is answered and naught is wanting.”

Paekche was Japan's primary source of Chinese culture, far easier to deal with than China itself. China was farther away and haughty: it demanded deference that irked the Japanese. But Paekche, eager to have Japan's warriors on its side, was willing to bow to Yamato as it also bowed to China. Its gifts were labeled tribute and it even sent royal princes as hostages. This was an attitude vastly pleasing to Yamato's leaders, who concocted notions of Japan as an equal of China, as an empire with its own satellites; they had satellite Paekche as proof.

Over the centuries Yamato had again and again gone to the aid of Paekche. To Iwai this was blind folly. It was the seafaring men of Kaya and Silla that he respected. He was convinced that in the inevitable showdown between Silla and Paekche the victor would be Silla.

For all its bloody involvement in support of Paekche, Yamato had little to show for it but bruises

Yamato to send troops to help. Silla had called on Koguryo, and Koguryo had sent a force that crushed the warriors from Japan. Yamato seemed to have forgotten, but Iwai's tribal memory was longer: most of the slain men had come from Kyushu.

More recently, in 512, Paekche, pleading that Koguryo had attacked it and taken a large piece of its territory, begged Yamato to ease the pain by “giving” it four of the Kaya towns. “These four border on Paekche,” their envoy argued. “Morning and evening they exchange communications; their fowls and dogs cannot be kept apart.”

He was asking Yamato to acquiesce in Paekche's taking the towns by force, for despite Yamato's pretensions they were not its to give. And in a deal that Iwai was certain smelled of bribery, Yamato had agreed. As a result, the rest of the Kaya towns now distrusted Yamato and looked to Silla for protection. Iwai fumed that Yamato had made it certain that Silla would take over all of Kaya.

To Iwai, Yamato's bungling was their own business--until they involved him. In that same year, 512, he had been asked to send forty-four fine horses to Paekche “as a gift from Yamato.” It was a continuing pattern: Yamato would promise Paekche rice or swords or fighting men and then ask Iwai to supply them. Iwai suspected that Yamato meant to weaken him.

No more. Last year--527--Yamato grandly announced that they would send an army of 60,000 to aid Paekche against Silla, but as usual dispatched only a cadre to Kyushu, led by one of its generals. He was to raise his army in Kyushu and transport it across the strait in Kyushu boats. Even though the figure of 60,000 certainly exaggerated the number they actually hoped to send, lwai would have none of it. He sent out the word. No men--not one, and no ships--not one.

The Yamato general was left like a beached whale. When he called for warriors, Iwai and the other chiefs replied with strange unanimity that all their men were incapacitated. When he ordered ships, the owners without exception answered that the hulls of all their vessels were, alas, too worm-eaten to make it across the strait. The general could see heavily laden boats entering and leaving port, but the owners asserted that they were making only short coastal runs and even those at grave risk.

The general threatened and he pleaded and he tried to cash in on old friendships, but he got nowhere. After months of futility he was obliged to return to Yamato and confess failure. Moreover, he had to report that shipments of gifts from Paekche were being

intercepted on Iwai's orders, and that luxuries intended for the men of Yamato were being distributed among the chiefs of Kyushu.

The chiefs of Yamato were indignant. They gathered in council. “Iwai has rebelled and has occupied the western wilds,” they declared, heedless that he had been there all along and that his realm had been civilized earlier and was surely as advanced as any part of Yamato. “Whom shall We make general?” There were two great military clans, the Otomo and the Mononobe, but the chief of the Otomo was the head of the federation; he was the Great Minister who had let Paekche take the four Kaya towns. It would have been imprudent of him to absent himself from the capital to lead an army to Kyushu, so the honor fell to the chief of the Mononobe, who was named Arakabi. The king took up the battle-ax and handed it to Arakabi, “This Iwai will not obey Us. Do thou go and chastise him.”

Now on this day late in the year 527 the two men and their armies faced each other across a field of withered stubble left after harvest: Arakabi of Yamato and Iwai of Kyushu.

Their forces glowered at each other, taking each other's measure. Then, as if at a signal understood but unseen and unheard, the two generals detached

themselves from their troops and on horses stepping smartly rode to face each other at midpoint.

“Iwai of Kyushu,” Arakabi shouted. “Why do you raise an army in rebellion against your sovereign? Arakabi of the Mononobe clan bears a sacred charge to smite you in punishment. Lay down your arms! Save yourself and your men from destruction!”

“Arakabi of the Mononobe clan, who has invaded our land from distant Yamato!” thundered Iwai. “Your king is not sovereign here. We rally to protect what is our own--our lives and our lands. Sheathe your swords and return to Yamato. Cease unjust demands on us! Then we shall live in peace!”

“You stir up disorder in the realm! Rely not on the steepness of your mountains to save you!”

“We shall attack like the rising of a storm! We shall sweep you away like a river at flood!”

They posed, glaring each at the other, then turned, galloped back to their own troops. With his sword upraised, Iwai roared a great battle cry. From across the field Arakabi's bellow echoed.

Drums rolled. From each side showers of arrows soared into the air, ripped into the enemy: men died before the armies joined. Flags flying, the two armies advanced. Their dust mingled. They fell on each other, man against man, each seeking someone he could destroy. Seasoned and practical and tough, these warriors aimed to stay alive and rack up kills. The field was a tumult of individual battles. Blood soaked into the dry earth.

When the light of the short winter day began to fade, the weary armies disengaged and withdrew to campsites readied by their menials. They counted their dead, dressed their wounds, warmed themselves at their fires, ate, and rested. The fighting had seesawed across fields but in the end the line of battle had scarcely shifted.

Dawn brought more fighting. In the morning Iwai's men beat back the enemy but they did not break. In the afternoon Iwai found his troops forced back but they held. When the day ended neither side could claim an advantage.

That night Iwai and his chiefs held council. When dawn broke Arakabi's army faced an empty field. The few old men tending deceptive campfires scattered and disappeared.

Arakabi cut short his troops' celebration. “This is no victory,” he told his captains grimly. “The enemy have concealed themselves in the mountains they know so well. They will attack when it suits them, from whatever direction gives them an advantage. We must spy them out and pursue them.”

And so it went, month after weary month. Iwai's force would suddenly appear, strike, melt away. They killed but they lost men too.

Arakabi never left off pursuit. Fighting crisscrossed the plain and ranged into the mountains all around. Spring came, the peasants planted their crops and saw them trampled by horsemen. Arakabi began to punish villages he suspected of aiding Iwai. He executed elders and then, his fury mounting, he burned whole villages and slaughtered the people. There was meager harvest in the autumn.

Another winter. Arakabi received reinforcements from Yamato. Iwai's forces dwindled; it was hard to replace the dead, hard to maintain spirit among the living. Some of his captains lost their taste for battle and, taking their men, went home. A few sought advantage by going over to the enemy; they were the most dangerous--they revealed his places of refuge. The Hayato warriors, their magic unavailing, melted away to the south.

Iwai had to face bitter truths. He called his son, who had not disgraced himself. “Save yourself and our family. I will not surrender but you must. Give Arakabi what he demands so that he can return to Yamato in triumph, and he will spare you.”

“But you . . . ?” asked his son.

“Do not concern yourself about me. I will disappear. I will ride away with my old comrade in arms. You will not see me again.”

“Let me come with you, whatever your destination.”

“You must remain to continue our family.”

His shaken son bowed in reluctant acquiescence and farewell. He watched his father and one staunch retainer ride into the mountains and he choked back a sob. Then he prepared to go and meet Arakabi.

Riding into the forested heights, Iwai let his mind drift through the past. He had achieved much and he had lost it. Perhaps Yamato was irrestible. Perhaps they would rule all the islands. But he was certain they faced disaster in the land across the strait. Would they survive that?

He would not be taken alive and he was determined that they would never find his bones. He would not be buried in the great tomb he had built for himself. His spirit would not be venerated there as he had venerated his father's spirit before his tomb.

Year after year, during the slack farming periods of winter and midsummer he had drafted hundreds of men, women, and children. Groaning their work songs, they had dragged huge slabs of granite to form the floor, walls, and ceiling of the vault that enclosed the massive coffin elaborately carved from a single block. They built a room high enough for men to stand in, spacious enough to hold all the auspicious goods that would be placed there with his body: dozens of swords to vaunt his military might, polished bronze mirrors and jeweled adornments to demonstrate his wealth, useful wares and implements so that his followers could serve him in the next world.

Then he called in the artists. The walls and ceilings of his vault, the antechamber, and the long entrance passageway were carved with auspicious designs, painted with colorful symbols of his power and images of voyage from this existence to the next.

Finally those people of his had hauled endless baskets of soil, covering the vault, building a mound that towered above them. When his foremen had supervised the planting of grass and seedlings to bind the surface, when the construction was complete, he had held a great party for the workers: all they could eat and drink, and how they had roistered! He had walked among them feeling lordly, accepting their thanks, complimenting their elders, laughing at the lewd songs and bawdy dances of the old women, smiling as couples disappeared into the bushes. (How many virgins had been deflowered, how many babes conceived?) It was an all-day all-night bash and a few hardy ones were still at it next morning (he had ordered that the liquor should flow until they could drink no more). His tomb was finished and he was satisfied. . . .

In the shadow of the forest he and his companion pushed deep into the mountains where not even hunters had penetrated. When they reached a place that Iwai thought would never be discovered he

produced the saké he had been carrying for this moment. They shared it and shared memories of drinking together in happier times.

“You have been my friend and companion since I was a child,” Iwai said. “You have never failed me. I ask of you now one last service. Dig a grave in this earth and bury my bones so that no man can ever find them, so that Iwai will disappear utterly.”

Kneeling in the fallen leaves he composed himself and then bowed low. His friend bowed and summoning all his strength slashed off his master's head.

Sobbing he dug a grave, deep, as Iwai had asked. He lowered the body and the head and covered them, taking pains to conceal the fresh earth with branches and leaves. Then he dug another grave, sat beside it, plunged his sword into his heart, and toppled in. Soon the ground collapsed to mantle him. The earth absorbed their bodies and the forest offered no hint that they lay there.

Iwai's son surrendered as his father had ordered. To save himself from the execution Arakabi had so earnestly wished to inflict on his father he expressed contrition for all the trouble Yamato had been put to and he turned over to Arakabi the Iwai stronghold on the Bay of Hakata. It had been Iwai's base for his relations with Kaya and Silla. Its skilled seafarers and their vessels were given up. The Iwai territory was cut off from the continent.

Iwai's son speedily found that a defeated leader commands little respect. Lesser landholders whose fealty to his father and grandfather was unshakable now asserted their independence. He lived to see his lands shrink to insignificance and the name Iwai become irrelevant.

He tried to console his father's spirit, which he knew roamed bitter and unfulfilled. Obsessed by the monumental empty tomb and the stone figures beheaded by Arakabi's raging soldiers, he built a shrine where the mound would have been opened to receive his father's body and he spent his days there, offering saké to his father's presence and drinking more of it himself. His own grave has not been identified. It was small.

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In retrospect Iwai was right about what would happen on the continent but fatally mistaken about events at home.

He could not resist unification and he could not stand alone against Yamato. The Yamato clans were on the move, determined to take control of all Japan. The struggle with Iwai was the last great campaign they had to fight. There were other chieftains like Iwai, with strong bases of power in other regions. Had they combined they could have overthrown the Yamato coalition and then Japan would have had a different ruling elite. But they did not combine. Separately they gave way, some to the threat of force, some to persuasion and concession, and like Iwai they faded from history.

But in the sphere of foreign policy, Iwai was wiser than Yamato. Within thirty-five years after his death, Silla was dominant on the Korean peninsula: it had defeated once-mighty Koguryo, and it had battered Paekche, wresting ports on the Yellow Sea that afforded easy traffic with China.

All this dismayed Yamato, but things got worse. Both Paekche and Koguryo, unstable after defeat, were rocked by bloody coups that sent immigrants fleeing to Japan with horror stories. China, revitalized under the new Tang dynasty, began to move against Korea. Yamato was now unquestionably the government, of Japan, but it was having its own problems. In 645 a coup that began with an assassination in the palace before the eyes of the startled empress brought a new group to power around the the throne. Unsure of themselves at first, they were aware that a foreign crisis is usually useful in rallying support at home. They cited events in Korea and began a military buildup.

In 660 Japanese fears were justified. A Chinese amphibious force and a Silla army jointly attacked and overwhelmed Paekche. Pockets of resistance fought on and an anguished appeal for help was speeded to Yamato. The Paekche king had been captured and to replace him the Japanese sent home the Paekche prince they held as hostage, along with a force of five thousand men to insure his safety. Having promised that a large army would follow, the empress and her son, crown prince, moved to Kyushu in 661 to be near the port of embarkation. Then the empress fell ill and died at the temporary palace and mobilization halted while the son--now emperor--escorted her body back to Yamato and performed the essential rites of mourning.

At last in the autumn of 663, almost three years after Paekche had fallen, half a dozen generals with an army of 27,000 set sail from northern Kyushu for the Korean port today called Kunsan, close to what had been Paekche's capital. Approaching the port, the Japanese sailed into a pincers between the T'ang Chinese fleet and the Silla army. Routed the first day, the Japanese ships regrouped to face the Chinese fleet again. “But,”reports a Japanese chronicle, “T'ang closed upon their vessels from right and left, and engaged them from all sides. In a short space

of time the imperial force was defeated, and many fell into the water and were drowned. The ships were unable to maneuver either astern or ahead.” The Japanese were all but annihilated, and that ended Japanese thrusts overseas for more than nine centuries.

When the survivors limped home with the dismal news Yamato was gripped by fear. China and Silla had a score to settle and Japan was a tempting target. Hastily organizing to repel an invasion, they turned to military engineers who had fled from Paekche.

To guard the capital, the Paekche engineers supervised the construction of a fort in Yamato and another that commanded the Inland Sea at one of its narrowest points.

In the strait between Korea and Kyushu guards were posted on the islands of Tsushima and Iki to warn by signal fires if an enemy fleet approached.

And in northern Kyushu, which would almost certainly be hit first, they built formidable defenses. An enemy landing along the shore would face mountainous terrain except at one point, where there is a valley through the mountains carved by a river that empties into Hakata Bay. The valley opens south to Iwai's old territory, the rich plain that would give an enemy a strategic base. To protect the plain, that valley had to be defended.

Deep in the valley the Paekche engineers set up a headquarters. In hastily raised wooden buildings resting on cedar poles sunk into the earth, they made their plans. They chose two mountains flanking the valley and climbed them to lay out fortifications exactly like those that had guarded their Paekche capital. They supervised the thousands of peasants drafted to throw up almost four miles of earthworks enclosing 440 acres on the summit of one, two and a half miles miles of earthworks around 158 acres on top of the other. Inside both ramparts were springs of good water. Dozens of storehouses were built for rice and weapons. (Their foundation stones still exist, there being not much temptation to dig these up and lug them down a mountain trail. In one place a visitor who scratches in the ground can find carbonized grains of rice from a fire that long ago destroyed a granary.) On both mountains a defending force could hold out for months.

That was not all. From one valley wall to the other, straight across the river, they built a dam nearly a mile long. The conduits that they devised carried the river's waters under the dam, but in time of danger the conduits could be closed to flood the valley with a deep moat sixty yards wide. Today their “water gate” has been cut by railroads and highways but it still stretches across the valley and its

artful design makes men marvel. It and the dams of the same kind that they threw across tributary rivers could have turned the valley into a cul-de-sac.

None of these great constructions was put to the test, for it turned out that China and Silla had no interest in invading Japan. Instead they moved to establish friendly relations and trade.

Now the Japanese were faced with a different problem. They knew very well the pomp and ceremony with which their envoys had been received by the Chinese. Confronted by the necessity to greet foreign delegations with no less dignity, they scrapped their makeshift military headquarters and on the same site they raised red-pillared halls.

In front of the imposing headquarters grew its city: the offices where hundreds of officials and clerks conducted business, the homes for those people, the shops of merchants who moved in to supply the swelling population, and, to make it complete, a pleasure quarter for after-hours diversion. All this was laid out not higgledy-piggledy as Japanese towns usually grew but formally the way the Chinese built their capital, in a checkerboard pattern of streets and avenues

bisected by a wide tree-lined boulevard. Here at Dazaifu that boulevard ran from the great gate through the city and straight on to an indulgence provided by nature: a salubrious hot spring. (The capital cities of Nara and, later, Kyoto, were also laid out on a checkerboard plan but they lacked a hot spring.)

This was the Distant Capital Dazaifu, the headquarters of the Governor General who controlled Kyushu and stood at the forefront in Japan's relations with the continent. But because this place was deep in the valley, a reception center, equally lavish, was built on the shore of Hakata Bay. There Dazaifu officials greeted and entertained foreign embassies. Some of eminence were conducted up the valley to be formally received by the Governor General. A few were important enough to be escorted all the way to the capital for an imperial audience.

It was a time of enormous energy in Japan. The chieftains of Yamato, firmly in control now, were transforming themselves into a cultured nobility at the same time that they strove to create a strong centralized government. China was the model, the fountain of knowledge. Dazaifu not only received envoys from the continent, it sent off delegation after delegation of officials, scholars, and Buddhist priests whose mission was to study the model, absorb its secrets, and bring them home. There was much to be done and a great will to do it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Year 730

Principal characters
Otomo Tabito, Governor General of Dazaifu
Lady Otomo Sakanoue, his half-sister
Otomo Yakamochi, his son
The young woman Kojima
Yamanoue Okura, Governor of Chikuzen
Manzei, Buddhist priest charged with building the temple Kanzeonji

The morning light came softly through the paper windows. The young woman beside him moved to open them and sunlight danced on the polished floor. In this New Year's season there was warmth in the air. The sky was soft and the height where his residence stood was white with the bloom of plum trees. The day was perfect for the occasion and, acknowledging that, their eyes met and they smiled. He thought again how fortunate he was. She was young and he was not, but she seemed not to mind. No, more than that: she truly cared for him, and he knew that he was in love with her. At sixty-six his life was drawing to a close, but this late love burnished his days.

His wife had died so soon after they came here to Dazaifu. When he was appointed Governor General she had been firm in wanting to come with him, though most wives stayed in the capital when their husbands were posted to the provinces. They had come as a family, bringing their two young children and Yakamochi, his thirteen-year-old son by an earlier wife. Had the journey been too much for her? Young as she was, was she shattered at leaving home? She took to her bed, the physicians floundered, and she died.

He had been desolate. His half-sister had hurried from the capital. In her charge the household ran smoothly and the children were cared for and educated; he was grateful for her presence. Lady Otomo Sakanoue was a notable personality in her own right: a poet as distinguished as he, a witty and attractive woman who had been loved by an imperial prince and a powerful politician. She knew the ways of the aristocratic world he and she had been born to, and she shared a passionate devotion to their Otomo family. He was fond of her but she could not fill the aching emptiness that gripped him. He could not work, he could not sleep, he could only compose elegies in response to the poems of condolence his friends sent.

Hoping to distract him, some of his officers had given a small party and this girl was among those summoned from the teahouses in the pleasure quarter of the town outside the gate. He had thought no other woman could attract him, yet he was touched by her grace when she sang a sad song and the thought of her remained after she left. When later that night he was escorted to his residence on the hill he found her sitting quiet in the entryway. She would leave at once if he wished her to, she said, but he found himself asking her to stay.

And so she came into his life. Not just into his bed--into his life. She was bright and lively; she made him laugh. And she had a mind:

of course she could make a poem when she came to him--her teahouse training taught her that--but he had polished her gift, and she was so quick that she surprised him. She surprised him in many ways.

She fanned the charcoal in the brazier until the water in the kettle purred. She made tea and served the first cup of the day. They sipped, taking in the blossoms, the clouds of bloom that he and his guests would celebrate in poems later, inspiration spurred by wine. One of his own poems came back to him--

Great sages of the past
gave the name of "sage" to wine.
How well they spoke!

His mood darkened, for though that poem and the other twelve he had spun out at the time dwelled on the pleasures of drinking, they had been written out of resentment.

He knew why at his advanced age he was here at Dazaifu. He was here because they wanted him out of the capital. "They" were the joyless men who now controlled the court: the leaders of the Fujiwara family.

It had been done politely. The order assigning him as Governor General had been handed over with ceremony and a gush of words. He was reminded that his father had served in the same post, and he

was assured that the position demanded someone of his rank and of his polish as an aristocrat and a poet, for he would entertain embassies from China and Korea; the ability to produce a poem that was both eloquent and apt--and, of course, in Chinese--was the mark of a cultured man, and he, Tabito, excelled at it. More, the responsibilities at Dazaifu demanded a military man of eminence, and surely there

was none more eminent than he, the head of the Otomo, Yamato's chief military clan. In the event of attack from abroad he would be responsible for defending Kyushu, the most likely target, but of more immediate concern were the fractious Hayato in southern Kyushu. No other man was as qualified to deal with them. Eight years earlier, when they rose in rebellion, killing the governor appointed by the court to try to control them and collect their taxes,he had led an army to subdue them. It had been a hard campaign, a year and a half of battling those intrepid warriors in their rugged land where their magic was strong. Many had fought till they dropped: he heavily had counted a dreadful toll of their soldiers, and he had lost too. But he had mastered them and they had not rebelled since. For the first time the court could truly claim to govern all of Kyushu.

For centuries the Hayato had frustrated and frightened the Yamato court as it tried to extend its sway over their territory. There

had been intervals when they were quiet, when they sent delegations and gifts of their handiworks (their oiled silks and bamboo wares were especially prized). When they appeared the court tried to awe them with a display of power. It mustered upwards of five hundred cavalrymen from the provinces around the capital, but at the same time it showered gifts on the delegates and honored them with ceremonies and titles. The Hayato were probably amused by the waffling.

Yamato had tried everything. The often useful tactic of intermarriage had linked the court's ruling family and their chieftains; the Hayato showed no compunction about fighting relatives. The court had sought to mollify them by appointing officials from among their number, rather than sending in strangers; the Hayato cut down their own. Men of distinction were dispatched to lecture on the rule of law and obedience to the emperor, and Buddhist priests were sent from Dazaifu to propagate that gentling religion;. all to no effect. Two hundred families were moved from orderly northern Kyushu into the South as civilizing agents; there was no mellowing as a result.

Several times during the sixth and seventh centuries the court brought groups of Hayato to the capital district and settled them there. Partly this was in the hope that as hostages they would ensure the good behavior of their kin back home (another hope that proved forlorn) but, more important, Yamato wanted to make use of fighting men so formidable. They were placed at critical points in the capital's defense scheme and they bolstered the imperial guard. The danger was not of foreign invasion but of civil war, the ever-present danger of a coup mounted by an alliance of powerful families and a disaffected prince.

In those days the weapons of war included sword, bow, lances both short and long, and magic. In battle the Hayato were supported by a sorceress of high rank who worked to cast a spell over the enemy. The Hayato brought to the service of the court not only military prowess but the magic bound up in their rites.

A ritual dance that the court particularly enjoyed was one that displayed the contortions of a drowning man as the tide rose about him: to his hips, his chest, his throat. The court's pleasure in watching these spasms derived from a myth that they represented the triumph of the emperor's ancient ancestor over the ancestor of the Hayato. The myth was not ancient; myths can be contrived to fill a need and in no time at all become certifiably hoary. In this case, since Yamato had not yet succeeded in conquering the Hayato, it was comforted to have stories of long-ago triumphs (another told of a comely young Yamato prince who put on woman's clothes to arouse the Hayato chieftain, then skewered him while cuddling).

The Hayato had a singular ability to dispel evil spirits by barking and howling like dogs. Dog spirits were known to have mystical powers, and because the Hayato came from the uncivilized backwater of southern Kyushu (some said they were a different people entirely, whose ancestors had come from far south in the ocean) they were naturally gifted at imitating dogs. Whenever the emperor went forth they preceded him, barking and howling when his sedan chair came to a curve in the road, a provincial border, or when it arrived at a station. A special Hayato office was established in the Ministry of War to make certain that the Hayato who had been resettled in Yamato did not become so domesticated that their barking lost its potency.

The resident Hayato, sometimes arrayed alongside equally truculent "barbarians" from the other end of Japan, the far north, were prominent in major court ceremonies: at the coronation of a new emperor, at the Great Harvest Festival in the autumn, at the rituals of the New Year, and at receptions for foreign embassies (where they were put forth as evidence that they had been conquered).

Tabito himself, as the court's ranking general, had sometimes led their march from positions left and right of the main gate into the palace enclosure and to their stations for the ceremonies. Remembering, he found himself telling the girl now sipping tea beside him how the Hayato sang and danced before the emperor to the accompaniment of strings, flutes, drums, and clappers; how they wore their swords backwards, draped red scarves over their shoulders, and put red and white ornaments in their hair. He told her how they barked: those on the left loudly, those on the right answering with soft growls, soft and loud alternating in antiphonal response. The girl clapped in delight, and he was pleased at having given her another glimpse of the glamorous court so far away.

Tabito had maintained an interest in the Hayato in the years since he had fought against them. They had earned his respect as strong, skillful warriors. He believed that he knew how to handle them, but he would have been in a better position to promote his ideas at the capital than here at Dazaifu.

And so, though he professed to be honored by his appointment as Governor General, he knew the motives of those who had put him here, and he smarted that he was in a middle-level position when by lineage and seniority he was ready for the highest level. He was head

of the Otomo, and though the name no longer meant what it once had, it was a great name, still with the potential to play an important role--if he were there, at the capital.

But he was here, Governor General of Dazaifu, effectively sidelined from court politics, sitting out his last years as far from the scene of action as those conniving upstarts could put him. And here he watched as younger men--lesser men--were promoted over him.

He yearned for the old days, when rule was simpler, when the Yamato government was a confederacy of clans, each with its function. One conducted ritual to praise and supplicate the gods; another made armor and weapons; and from time immemorial his clan, the Otomo, had been warriors.

There was another lineage, who, tracing their ancestry to the Sun Goddess, held the position of priest-chieftain among them, but only as first among equals, and nothing without the armies of other clans in the confederacy, the Otomo in particular. Because the many consorts of that line always produced a plentitude of princely claimants, the real power rested with the clan that enthroned the candidate of its choice and then supplied the ministers to run his government. The process of selecting a king usually involved the demise of his rivals, and in this a military clan held an advantage. The Otomo had often been kingmakers.

Tabito’s great-great-grandfather, Otomo Kanamura by name, controlled the government for more than forty years, through the reigns of five successive kings, all of whom he selected and, by judicious use of the Otomo army, put on the throne. It was Kanamura who was head of the government at the time of Iwai and who dispatched the army that destroyed him. Kanamura chose not to send Otomo warriors to battle Iwai, but a decade or so later he sent them to Korea, with two of his sons in command, in a doomed attempt to prevent Silla from taking over the merchant towns of Kaya.

Kanamura's grandsons--Tabito's grandfather and great-uncle-played major roles in fighting and winning a brisk civil war in 672. They and their allies fought to put their candidate on the throne because they opposed the direction the government was taking--the push to create a strong central government on the Chinese model, and so to strip the old clans of their power. Ironically, once their man became emperor he pushed centralization with even greater zeal than his predecessor.

Among the strategies pursued in the name of reform was the creation of a national army to replace clan troops like the Otomo's.

Most of the unhappy peasants' sons who were drafted got neither training nor equipment; most of them ended in labor gangs on construction projects; but deprived of their hereditary role the power of clans like the Otomo faded away.

One resolute and prolific family had seized control of the new bureaucracy. They bore the name Fujiwara. Though the Fujiwara were spun off from an ancient clan, that name was new. It dated only from the time of Tabito's father, and it still sounded unfamiliar to the ears--to Tabito both unfamiliar and unpleasant. The Fujiwara and a co-conspiring prince had come to power with a coldly perpetrated coup. At a palace reception for envoys from Korea, in front of the empress, they had murdered the current strongman. Assassinations were common enough, and Tabito thought that the victim deserved it, but this killing-- in the palace, before foreigners--was distasteful.

The Fujiwara brought the same grim seriousness to the business of founding their dynasty and running the government. To Tabito the imposing new capital at Nara was a symbol of their dominance: laughter and lightness were banned; the burdens of office were to be borne gravely. In a fit of spleen he dashed off his poems in praise of drinking.

How ugly!
those men who
with airs of wisdom
refuse to drink wine.
Take a aood look,
and they resemble apes.

There would be drinking and laughter where he was in charge. There would be wine and poetry at Dazaifu this afternoon and as long as Otomo Tabito was Governor General.

It was time for the girl to leave. He watched as she performed a morning ritual: separating the mats they slept on, as each night she pushed them together, and straightening the mussed bedding so the maids wouldn't see the state they left them in. This little prudery delighted him. She bowed half-teasingly, flashed one more smile, and was gone.

She would be back for the party along with other women from the teahouses, called to pour wine and jolly the guests. He would watch her fondly but they both knew it would be unseemly if she stayed close to him. When night fell she would be close.

The maids came and he went to his morning bath. With the window slid open he feasted on the plum blossoms as he soaked in the tub.

*

When the sun was high they gathered. First to arrive was Tabito's closest friend at Dazaifu, crustily honest Yamanoue Okura, Governor of Chikuzen, the province in which Dazaifu lay. Tabito and Okura had developed warm bonds here. Sharing a love of Chinese poetry and learning, nostalgic for the capital yet exhilarated because they were at the gateway for the Chinese influences that were transforming their country, they drew together, supporting and stimulating each other.

These two men and Lady Otomo Sakanoue made Dazaifu the poetry capital of Japan: they were the three finest poets of their age. But Lady Sakanoue would not participate today. Being a woman she had not attended the university to be trained in the Chinese classics, and the festivities today would be decidedly Chinese. Not only was praise of plum blossoms a fashion newly imported from China, the plum tree was itself a quite recent immigrant. Numbers of them had been planted around Dazaifu, but had Lady Sakanoue been asked she might have said that her taste, Japanese taste, was for the fragile,
14 short-lived cherry blossom. And although Tabito and Okura believed that they were breaking new ground with their Sinified poems, Japanese taste proved to be for the kind of lyricism that Lady Sakanoue was gifted with.

My heart, thinking
"How beautiful he is"
Is like a swift river
Which though one dams it and dams it
Will still break through.

Close as they became at Dazaifu, it is doubtful that Tabito and Okura could have formed the same friendship at the capital, for they were of quite different status. Tabito's pedigree stretched back to mythology but Okura's background is obscure; some believe that he was a naturalized Korean or the son of Korean immigrants. Born in 660, he held minor government posts until in 701 his facility in Chinese gained him a position as a scribe with an embassy appointed to go to China; his name came last among the members of the mission.

The delegation tried to sail in 701 but were driven back by storms; they finally got away at the end of July 702. It is difficult to know how many years Okura spent in China. The ambassador returned two years later. (He proudly reported that when he was received in China, one official told him that he had heard of Japan, that it was said to be a country of gentlemen whose people enjoy prosperity and happiness and are extremely polite, adding that the ambassador's "most favorable appearance" confirmed all that he had heard. Being a bearer of good news, the ambassador was promoted two ranks and rewarded with rice fields and other lands.)

However, the vice-ambassador and his suite did not return until the spring of 707; if Okura was one of this group he would have had nearly five years in China.

At any rate, his years in China and his excellence as a Chinese scholar raised his prestige so that in 714 he finally received court rank, though low, making him a member of the lower aristocracy. In 721 he was appointed tutor to the crown prince, the young man who now was emperor, and in 726 he reached the high point of his government career when he was made Governor of Chikuzen.

He was the only one of the coterie around Tabito who had been to China, and his poetry is the most Chinese. His famed poem on poverty surged from his open- hearted response to conditions around him, but he could not have written it had he not known the Chinese tradition of social protest (just as Tabito's poems in praise of wine show that he knew the Chinese sages' raffish delight in drinking). Here, in part, is Okura's destitute peasant:

Like other men I work my fields
But only rags hang from my shoulders....
Under a sagging roof, in leaning walls,
With straw scattered over a dirt floor,
My parents at my pillow,
Wife and children at my feet,
Surround me with quiet sobbing.

In the hearth no embers glow,
In the pot a spider spins its web,
We forgot long ago how to cook rice....

And yet the village headman comes growling at the door to collect taxes. “Is this,” his peasant cries, “Is this the way of the world?”

Okura did not exaggerate this picture of grinding poverty. AChinese poet would have blamed the emperor’s rule. Okura could not bring himself to do this. He offers no remedy.

It was probably Okura’s eloquent poems of condolence when Tabito’s wife died that made the two men close. Okura was no stranger to grief. He had lost a young son. Heartsick, he had addressed these lines to the deity of the underworld:

He is young,
and does not know the way.
0 Angel of Hades,
I shall send you an offering.
Carry him there on your back.

Next to arrive was Tabito’s neighbor, the Buddhist priest Manzei. In civilian life Manzei had been a government official named Kasa Maro. He had entered the priesthood and taken the name Manzei late in life, on the death in 722 of an empress he had admired, but his priestly robes did not prevent the government from using his services. In 723 he was sent to build the major Buddhist temple planned as part of the Dazaifu complex.

He came with an impressive record as an administrator and builder, having been especially rewarded for constructing the Kiso Road through the mountains to link the capital district and the regions in the northeast. In later centuries the road he engineered would become the Kiso Highway, the mountain route linking Tokyo and Kyoto, parallel to the Tokaido coastal route. Building a road of any kind through those mountains was a notable achievement but, like Japan’s other roads at that time, his Kiso Road was little more than a footpath and still rough, as recorded in a folk song from one of the provinces it traversed:

The highway through Shinano
Is a new-cut road.
You may trip on the stubs:
Put on your sandals, dearest!

The temple being built was called Kanzeonji because it was to be dedicated to Kannon, the Buddhist deity of mercy and compassion. Building Kanzeonji was an assignment suited to Manzei's abilities but it was not an easy task. He had already worked on it for seven years and it was far from finished.

Its construction had been ordered more than half a century earlier. When Dazaifu was being built in the 660s the emperor of that time decreed that Kanzeonji be erected beside it as a place for prayer in memory of his mother, the Empress Saimei. She had been empress when it was decided to rescue Paekche from the assault by Silla and China. No doubt the decision was made by powers behind the throne, but she was a spirited lady who enjoyed her role as commander-in-chief, and she came to Kyushu in 661 with her son the crown prince so that she could personally oversee the assembly and dispatch of the troops. She died here, in a temporary palace not far distant, and it was the necessary period of mourning that delayed the expedition for two years before it sailed to disaster in 663.

It is understandable that her son wished to commemorate her. Consort of a ruler, she took over when he died, something not unheard of but not usual either. After three years she resigned in favor of her younger brother, and when he died she became empress again. Twice empress, she was also the mother of two emperors: the son who was crown prince when she died, and his younger brother, who launched the civil war of 672 to take over by eliminating his brother's son and heir. (That was the war in which the Otomo played a decisive role, and were subsequently mortified to find that their reward was aggressive action to strip power from clans like theirs.)

The temple that Manzei was charged with building had to be an impressive one of many buildings, and construction had gone slowly. Back in 709 Dazaifu had received an order from the clearly impatient court: the temple had been established by imperial decree but "years have passed and it is not yet completed"; therefore Dazaifu should see to it that fifty priests were assigned to act as foremen for the gangs of laborers that were to be drafted during the peasants' slack months in the winter, so that "with expert supervision" the temple would be constructed quickly.

Whether fifty priests were ever assembled and, if they were, whether their supervision was expert, is doubtful. In any case it would have been difficult to muster the gangs of laborers.

As Okura wrote, conditions among the peasants were often desperate. Northern Kyushu was first to receive new methods from the continent, and its farming was the most advanced in Japan--iron tools were used here centuries

before they appeared in the Yamato area. Nevertheless, agriculture then was primitive. Irrigation, where it existed, was crude. Seed was a remote ancestor of today's varieties. Little was understood about fertilizing; when land was no longer productive it was abandoned. The peasants were burdened with taxation in kind and in labor, including a system that forced them to get their seed from a government granary, where it was issued as a loan at high interest.

The chronicles of those years are peppered with reports of drought, flooding, violent storms, plagues of insects, blight, epidemic disease, and consequent famine all over Japan. Dazaifu reported that calamities had repeatedly prevented the growing of crops. Prayers to both Shinto and Buddhist deities seemed unavailing. The emperor lamented that, because of his shortcomings, "Our conduct is not approved by Heaven," and "for this reason the seasonal changes are out of order, rain and drought do not come when due, the crops do not ripen, the people are suffering." Many peasants became wandering vagrants. Those drafted to work on Kanzeonji were likely too emaciated or dull in spirit to be of much use. Or they melted away into the night.

And so Manzei had been sent to build what his predecessors could not. He worked valiantly and with some success. His being a poet was a help, for in seeking labor and materials he had often to joust, in an urbane yet determined way, with both Tabito and Okura. He usually got some of what he needed. Buildings were rising.

Few of Manzei's poems have come down to us but one of the most quoted and best loved poems of the period is his. We do not know whether he composed it at Dazaifu or somewhere else, before or after he became a priest, but it expresses the Buddhist idea of evanescence.

To what shall I compare
this life?
the way a boat
rowed out from the morning harbor
leaves no traces on the sea.

The other guests assembled quickly: the governors of the provinces of Bungo (southeast of Dazaifu) and Chikugo (Imai's old stronghold, south of Dazaifu); the deputy governors of Satsuma and Osumi (the two provinces at the southern tip of Kyushu, the homes of the Hayato people Tabito had campaigned against); the governor and his deputy from the island of Iki (in the strait, about a third of the way to Korea); the deputy governor of Tsushima (the much larger islands about two-thirds of the way to Korea); two of Okura's staff in Chikuzen;

and from the officials at Dazaifu, Tabito's three vicegovernors, the captain and the lieutenant of the military, the secretary and his assistant, the physician and the pharmacist, the magistrate and two judicial secretaries, the Shinto priest and the Yin-Yang master, and the chief accountant. With four others whose posts we do not know, there were altogether thirty-two men, and thirty-two verses resulted, all in the characteristic short form of thirty-one syllables.

Since the Japanese then regulated their lives by the lunar calendar, the thirteenth day of the New Year fell on our February 4. At Dazaifu on that day it was warm, however capricious spring might be later. Mats covered with red cloth were spread under the blossoming trees, wine flowed, the delicacies of the season were served. When enough cups had been drained, rank was forgotten and the merry guests broke slender branches from the trees to garland each other with bloom.

Tabito had been selective in issuing invitations. No one was invited who would have been embarrassed to commit verse in such company. Everyone present was capable of producing a poem on the spot, but, though there was pretense that it was all extemporaneous, each man had worked and worried over his thirty-one syllables ever since he received his invitation: inspiration could fail, wine could help or hinder. Here is a sampling of their efforts:

When spring comes
And the first plums bloom
In your garden,
Could you spend the long spring days
Looking on them by yourself?
-- Okura

In my garden
The plum blossoms fall-
Or does snow flow
From the distant heavens?
-- Tabito

Spring comes, and the nightingale
cries hidden in the treetops
as it swoops
to the lower sprays of plum.

-- Yamaguchi Wakamaro, deputy secretary

Tabito thought highly enough of the day's harvest to copy them all and send them to a friend at Nara: "On the thirteenth of the first month [of 7301 we gathered for a banquet at the house of the old man, the Governor General. It was the splendid season of early spring. The weather was pleasant; the wind was mild. Plum blossoms scattered like powder before the mirror; orchids emitted fragrance like a sachet tucked in the sash.... In the garden young butterflies danced; in the sky last year's geese returned north. Here, with heaven for our canopy and the earth for our seat, we drew knee to knee and passed the cup.... The poetry of old includes verses on the falling plum blossoms--and how does our day differ from the past? We composed a few slight songs on the plums in the garden."

*

The many festivities of the New Year behind him, Tabito turned to routine duties: overseeing the Dazaifu staff of several hundred, reviewing the reports that flowed in from Kyushu's eight provinces and the two islands under his jurisdiction; monitoring the receipt of taxes.

The tax system was modeled on China's. Agriculture was really the country's only industry. Since the most valuable resource was the land that could grow rice, the government undertook to parcel out that paddy land equitably so that every peasant household could pay its taxes and, necessarily, have enough left to live on.

A census conducted every six years identified who could be taxed and who was entitled to an allotment of land. A household received a quarter of an acre for each male over the age of six, and two-thirds of that for a female. (Originally a new-born baby received an allotment, but infant mortality was so high that the constant granting and retrieving of allotments was vexing.)

With the central government reaching down to manipulate the income of each family, and a trail of bureaucratic paper that stretched back to the Bureau of Accounts in the Population Ministry, it was an involved, burdensome system. To Tabito it was offensive, as offensive as those humorless men who had perpetrated it as part of their design to centralize all power in themselves.

He admitted, however, that in much of the country it was working. It was working around Dazaifu, in the northern provinces of Kyushu, where the peasants tilled their allotted fields with no more than their customary grumbling. It was not working in the southern provinces, Osumi and Satsuma, where the Hayato stoutly resisted the scheme and had killed a governor or two to emphasize their views.

While the vice-governors of those two provinces were at Dazaifu for the plum blossom party, Tabito had talked quietly with each of them. He was concerned about maintaining peace in that area, and shortly he sent off to the capital a strongly worded dispatch. It had never been possible to enforce the allotment system in those two provinces, he stated; more strife and bloodshed would surely flow from further attempts to force it on them. He recommended that the farmers of those provinces be permitted to hold land as they chose. (After pondering, the court agreed.)

The most basic tax extracted from the peasants was labor, corvee (as in building Kanzeonji) or military service (which often degenerated into mere labor).

The commodity taxes were collected by the governors, who kept what was authorized to run their provinces (Dazaifu audited them to curb extravagance) and forwarded the rest. The rice went into

Dazaifu's warehouses to cover operating expenses, but rice was just one of the items.

There were goods that the court demanded all of. Silk was one; only courtiers could wear silk. Another was the dried plants that yielded a rich purple dye, a hue forbidden to all but the nobility (sometimes Dazaifu dyed fabrics and sent them to the capital).

Beyond such preempted items the government demanded a share of just about everything the peasants produced in their struggle to eke out a living: the cloth the women wove from plant fibers, the fish dried in the sun, the furs of animals trapped, the salt extracted from the sea; taxes were a crushing burden. In answer to Okura's destitute peasant, yes, that was the way of the world.

Kyushu was now operating in the black. Until recently it had not been producing enough to support all of Dazaifu's operations and the government had to support its distant capital with iron and bundles of bamboo to make arrows and with silk and cloth to present to foreign envoys in return for their "tribute."

Handling and keeping track of tax goods occupied a large part of Dazaifu's staff. Once in a while Tabito would stroll through the accounting section just to let the horde of clerks know that he was aware of them. These young men came from the solid old local gentry of Kyushu. They had received their education--reading, writing, figuring--at Dazaifu's academy, set up for that purpose. They had been drafted to serve here, but most of them counted the months until they could go

home to work in a district or provincial office, where their family connections would give them more importance and their prospects would be brighter.

Every bundle of tax goods that came in carried a tag, a thin strip of wood, usually from one to three feet long, two to three inches wide; it listed in black ink the item, quantity, and source. The clerks recorded the information and totted up the amounts, providing the basis for the reports that flowed to Tabito and on to the capital.

When they caught up with their work, some of the clerks would shave boards that had been tallied and on the clean surface they would practice their writing or copy maxims from a popular Chinese book on how to pass examinations for advancement. If Tabito approached, such boards were hastily hidden, but the Governor General had been known to spot someone's effort, ask to see it, and utter a word of praise or encouragement to ease the victim's embarrassment.

(In the many excavations of Dazaifu's site, hundreds of those boards have been found, most of them at least partly legible despite more than a millennium in the earth.)

For relief from paperwork Tabito rode out on inspections, some of several days to one of the provinces beyond the mountains, some of a few hours, as when he checked on the progress at Kanzeonji, which was separated from the Dazaifu headquarters only by the buildings of the academy where the young clerks had been trained.

At Kanzeonji Manzei's busiest season was drawing to a close, for with the third month the time for planting neared and his drafted peasants grew restive. Both he and Tabito were relieved that the winter had brought noticeable progress on some buildings, and Manzei pointed out augmented stocks of roughed-out timbers, piled on blocks away from the damp earth, with wedges between them so that air could circulate as they dried. His skilled carpenters would have enough to work with through the warm months.

On one of his visits Tabito took occasion to teasingly congratulate Manzei on having successfully overcome the impediment of age and priestly vocation by fathering the baby born to one of his servants, in status a slave but nonetheless attractive. Manzei accepted the compliment gracefully. (Five generations and more than a century later, the descendants of that child, citing its aristocratic father, successfully petitioned to change their rank from slave to freeman.)

Quite regularly Tabito did what he did early one balmy day in late spring: he summoned his son Yakamochi to join him in inspecting Dazaifu's defenses. With the captain of the military (who was also an Otomo) and the personnel officer, trailed by junior officers, they rode out toward Onojo, the fortifications on one of the two mountains that flanked the valley headquarters. Tabito was in his element, a military man guiding his son to follow their clan's tradition.

After the stiff climb to the top and a tea break to rest the horses, they rode the five-mile path inside the breastworks, checking emplacements and the disposition of troops. When they reached one of the several clusters of storehouses Tabito dismounted to inspect the rice and weapons they held. He took time to satisfy himself that the required quantities were actually there and in good condition, for, as he reminded his officers, in case of attack the entire headquarters would take refuge on the two garrisoned mountains; they would have to be fed and armed to fight.

The troops were Frontier Guards. About three thousand were under Tabito's command, stationed on the two mountains, on the islands of Tsushima and Iki, and at lookout posts where they stood ready to light the signal fires that constituted an advance warning system stretching from Tsushima to Dazaifu.

On this day the Frontier Guards were Tabito's first concern. He frequently dismounted, his party necessarily following suit, so that he could talk with the men face to face. They had been conscripted from provinces hundreds of miles to the northeast, close to the limits of the court's control; not far beyond was the northern frontier and hostile "barbarians." In every province men were drafted into the national army that was supposed to replace the private armies of clans like the Otomo, but only the reputedly dauntless men of the northeastern provinces were sent to Dazaifu. It was said that though an arrow might hit one of them in the forehead, he would never be hit in the back, and the soft men of the capital district regarded them with uneasy awe.

Reputation notwithstanding, Tabito was quite certain that morale was low among his Frontier Guards. They had been chosen arbitrarily, torn from their young wives and old parents, marched for dusty days until they reached the port of Naniwa--Osaka today--where they had been herded onto boats for days of uncomfortable sailing to distant Kyushu. Their tours of duty were supposed to be three years but they knew that recruitment often lagged and that if no replacements arrived they would be held over. They found themselves in an unfamiliar landscape among people whose speech they could scarcely understand. Their soldiering seemed to consist mostly of growing the vegetables they ate; it made them homesick for their own fields. They were told that they were there to defend

their emperor's land but emperor and country were uncomprehensible: the only loyalty they felt was to their families and homes, and they worried that they might never see them again.

Yamamochi, at his father's side that day, never forgot the Frontier Guards at Dazaifu. Twenty-five years later he had to supervise the departure at Naniwa of a new levy of men bound for Kyushu. A brilliant poet himself, greater than his father, and different (his aunt, Lady Sakanoue, had been a greater influence than his father), it occurred to him there at the port to ask the unhappy conscripts for poems. Most he discarded but some he included in an immense anthology he was compiling (perhaps he touched them up a bit). Many are straightforward laments-

My wife must be longing for me deeply--
Even in the water I drink
Her face appears.
For the world I can't forget her.

but some are forthright in their anger-

Truly he is an evil man
To take me as a soldier
When I am so ill!

From today on
With never a look back
I go to be the emperor's damn shield.

Faced with bored and unhappy men, Tabito was inspired to call for an archery contest. The officers stationed on the mountain were upset--they hated to be surprised-- but targets were set up along the earthworks and the men in the vicinity were mustered. Training had been almost totally neglected until Tabito came as Governor General. He had ordered it stepped up but he suspected that the officers were less than zealous in following through. Still, most of the men had hunted for game with bows back home, and after they limbered up and got used to the bows from the storehouse they shot well.

Competition banished lethargy, they began to enjoy themselves, and bulls-eyes brought cries of "You got a rabbit!" or "A pheasant! You downed him!" In a quiet aside, Tabito told Yakamochi that they did far better than the courtier guards at the capital, who were given at least a small prize if they managed to hit the wall on which the target was placed. The young man took the hint and from that day on began to train harder.

Tabito personally commended those who scored highest and ordered saké for all, further upsetting his officers, who had counted on drinking it themselves. He left orders that such contests were to be held regularly for all the men, and he rode down the mountain pleased that he had left at least one contingent of Frontier Guards livelier than he found them. Tonight he would tell that lovely girl all about it.

*

The rainy season arrived, ran its sultry course, and gave way to summer's heat. At its most enervating, one of Tabito's legs began to pain him. He limped for a couple of days while the leg swelled and turned an ugly red. Then he took to his bed. His temperature rose alarmingly, and the pain was worse than any he had suffered as a soldier. The Dazaifu physician and the pharmacist concocted herbal medicines to reduce his fever, others to purge his blood, and still more to combat the infection; none seemed to help. The Yin-Yang master searched the astrological signs and tried all manner of divination to determine the source of the evil.

The household was shaken. With Lady Sakanoue's blessing, the young woman from the town moved in to share around-the-clock nursing with a devoted maid who had come with Tabito from Nara. They kept cool cloths on his forehead, debated whether hot or cold should be applied to his leg, and second-guessed the doctor.

Okura sent anxious inquiries. Manzei sent a team of priests who established themselves in an anteroom and prayed without cessation. As word spread, prayers went up from Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines all over Kyushu.

Tabito, feverish and dazed with pain, convinced that death was near, agonized that the head of the Otomo was dying in such a remote place, lamented that his half- brother and nephew were not at hand to hear his last wishes. At once an urgent message was dispatched to the capital. The bearer, riding hard on a fast horse, carried one of the eight copper bells then allotted to Dazaifu to speed vital journeys; its shrill jangle cleared the narrow way ahead of him and alerted post stations to ready a fresh horse.

Immediately the word reached Nara, the two Otomo men were summoned and ordered to ride in haste. By the time they reached Dazaifu the crisis had passed. The infection had gathered, opened, and suppurated, and now was beginning to heal. Tabito apologized to his kinsmen for their unnecessary trip. Before long he was up and about, and the two made ready to return. Tabito was not yet able to ride

but Captain Otomo Momoyo and Yakamochi led a group that accompanied them to the post station on Hakata Bay, then as now a busy port. After sharing a farewell drink and exchanging poems, the two travelers boarded a boat for a return journey more leisurely than their headlong dash to reach Dazaifu.

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The rest of the year moved by without drama. Tabito especially enjoyed sitting with Okura before an open window at the residence, gazing at the mountains in the distance, noting their changing colors as autumn advanced, and looking down at the Chinese red and gold of the headquarters, while they discussed Chinese poets and philosophers. Tabito never tired of hearing Okura reminisce about his years in China.

At the end of the year Tabito received the orders he had often longed for. He was promoted to be one of the Great Counselors, the topmost three or four officials in the government. His term as Governor General of Dazaifu was over. He was to return to the capital to take up his new duties.

He was under no illusion. He knew that the appointment, coming so late in his life, was largely ceremonial: he would have no real influence, exercise no great power. But it was an honor. He prepared to travel during the coldest time of the year.

Now that he must leave Dazaifu he had the inevitable regrets. He would miss Okura and Manzei. He would not again see the plum blossoms outside the window of the Governor General’s residence. He would miss the girl.

He told her when she came on the evening of the day that he received his orders, but he knew that she had already heard. She buried her head against his chest and made no sound, but when he lifted her face to his it was wet with tears.

He had already done what he could. He had given her a teahouse of her own and enough money so that she would be independent. She need never entertain a man unless she chose to.

He included her in the party that would see him off. One or two of the others were miffed by this (but not Okura or Manzei or Lady Sakanoue), which bothered him not at all; he was old enough and held enough rank to do as he pleased. And so she was one of those who rode with him as far as the post station at Ashiki, close by Mizuki, the massive defensive dam across the river.

Tears were shed at Ashiki, and not only by the girl. Of course poems were exchanged, this by the governor of Chikugo:

Dismal from now on,
the road over Ki Mountain--
and I had always wanted to take it!

The girl--her name was Kojima--tried hard not to embarrass him by being emotional:

Don't let your heart
race with thoughts of home.
Watch the winds
with care before you go
for the sea road is a savage one.

Tabito's reply was less restrained:

That 1, who thought myself a strong man,
Should now, on Mizuki's embankment,
Shed tears on bidding you farewell!

And then he was gone. He boarded a ship at Hakata Bay and sailed into the Inland Sea. As he passed coastal views that he had shared with his wife on the way down to Dazaifu the old sorrow deepened and it did not lighten when he reached home, where everything reminded him of her: Yet in dreams his contrary heart flew to Dazaifu.

This empty house,
with no one here,
is more painful to be in
than to be on a lonely sojourn,
with grass for a pillow.

His friends rallied to welcome him home and after the festivities of the New Year he took up his new duties. He did not long enjoy his lofty position at the court. He died on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month.

Okura ended his tour as governor of Chikuzen that year, but returned to Nara too late to see his old friend. Manzei was still building Kanzeonji.

CHAPTER FOUR

The years 730-775

Principal characters
The monk Fusho
Priest Gembo
Kibi Makibi
Otomo Yakamochi, son of Tabito, now head of the Otomo family
The Emperor Shomu
His consort, Empress Kogyo
Fujiwara Hirotsugu
Fujiwara Nakamaro
Priest Ganjin, from China
Otomo Komaro, nephew of Tabito, cousin of Yakamochi
Empress Koken, daughter of Shomu and Kogyo; she reigned twice, the second time as Empress Shotoku
Priest Dokyo

Otomo Tabito was admirably suited to receive foreign dignitaries but none appeared during his term as Governor General of Dazaifu; his courtier's polish and facility in Chinese were never put to use. After he returned to the capital, the pace of diplomatic exchange quickened. In 732 Dazaifu sent off a mission to the Silla government of Korea, a gesture toward easing the usually sour relationship with that country. Tensions did lessen a bit, for shortly thereafter a delegation from Silla made a return visit. They bore the customary ceremonial gifts, which the Japanese recorded as "tribute." Each country, aping China, labeled the other a subordinate, obligated to acknowledge subservience with offerings. In their China-centered world, there was no such thing as diplomacy between equals: nations, like individuals, had to be part of a hierarchy.

Awesome though China was, it irked the Japanese to play vassal. More than a century earlier, they had attempted to assert equality by addressing a letter from the Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun to the Emperor of the Land of the Setting Sun. The unlucky envoy who delivered this letter got a severe scolding, and on his return trip found it prudent to lose the reply from the Chinese emperor rather than deliver it to his own sovereign. He was forgiven for his carelessness.

After one more try ("From the Emperor of the East to the Emperor of the West"), which the Chinese rejected with equal hauteur, the Japanese stopped

sending a letter with their ambassador and thus avoided humbling themselves in writing. The Chinese harrumphed at this, but put up with it.

In 733, the year after the exchange with Silla, Dazaifu's reception center at the port of Hakata had the much bigger job of dispatching the most impressive mission to China that Japan had ever attempted. Previously only one or two ships were sent; this time four ships were especially built for the hazardous voyage. A century earlier, the Japanese were able to cross the strait and then hug the coast of Korea and the Liaotung Peninsula to get to northeastern China; now Silla would not permit Japanese ships to enter Korean harbors, forcing them to take the longer, more dangerous route south to the Ryukyus Islands and then across the China Sea.

The ships were big, about 130 feet long, but they had just one mast amidships and were flat-bottomed, without a keel, so they could sail only before the wind. A ship could carry 150 men, about half of them crew, who had to row if the wind failed or was contrary. The crew included navigators, diviners, carpenters, physicians, archers, and interpreters.

The passengers were chosen for their potential. Painters, sculptors, musicians--all kinds of artists and artisans--were sent to polish their skills. Young scholars and Buddhist priests were dispatched to study at the fountainhead of knowledge; some of them expected that their stay in China would stretch to many years.

Inconspicuous among them were two young monks who had been chosen for a special mission by a high priest at Nara. They were to seek out in China a Buddhist priest of such eminence and character that he could impose order on Japan's unruly Buddhist establishment. Buddhism was still young in Japan--only a couple of centuries had passed since its introduction--and it was not yet properly organized. The greatest problem was with ordination. There were no standards to meet before one donned the robes, no criteria and no tests and no authority to enforce standards. One could ordain oneself by uttering a simple vow. All too often monasteries were noisy and profane, priests and nuns were licentious. The government had issued dozens of laws to no effect. The priesthood had to be reformed from within. The two monks were expected to find a priest who could do that, and somehow persuade him to emigrate to Japan. It would not be easy, but they were given time. They would remain in China until Japan sent its next envoy, whenever that might be.

To head a mission to China, to impress the Chinese, the Japanese always chose a courtier of polish and skill. In this case he was a Fujiwara. Before he left the capital, he sought out Yamanoue Okura for first-hand knowledge of China and

the difficult voyage. Okura gave him a parting poem: “Farewell, let there be no mischance. Come back quickly!”

There was always probability of mischance. Experience told the Japanese that very likely half the ships and the men they carried would never see Japan again. In the late spring of 733 Dazaifu officials saw them off with tearful farewells. The men aboard toasted each other as men did who set out to face danger, their wine cups filled with water.

At first the four vessels were able to keep together, then they lost sight of each other. They weathered a terrifying storm, fought contrary winds, wallowed in dead calm, but all four made port in China. Their voyage had taken more than three months.

It took more months to arrange travel to the capital and to make the long overland trek. They arrived just about a year after leaving Dazaifu.

Hoping for advice, the young monks sought out two Japanese who had been in China for the seventeen years since the last Japanese embassy, years that each had filled with accomplishment. Now they were preparing to return home, fitted for important service.

First they visited Priest Gembo. They were awed. His scholarship had won the admiration of the Chinese emperor, who had awarded him high court rank and a singular honor, the purple robe of state. No Japanese before him had been so praised. A stocky man with dark, heavy brows set in a face like a warrior’s, he gave them a perfunctory audience and left them breathless. They heard that he was carrying back to Japan a number of precious Buddhist images and more than a thousand volumes of scripture.

After Gembo, his friend Makibi seemed ordinary, although his reputation was almost as great. A member of the ancient Kibi family, Makibi was a small, mild man, but the monks sensed that he was dedicated to proper form and etiquette. As a Confucian scholar preparing for government service, he had specialized in the Chinese classics, but he had also studied astronomy, divination, military strategy, and the mathematical science of making an accurate calendar. He told his two young visitors that he had learned to play the Chinese lute called the *biwa* and a challenging game called *go*, played with black and white stones on a board marked into squares; he recommended that the monks learn it--excellent mental exercise. He had come to China when he was twenty-three, he remarked, about the same age as the two before him; now he was forty. He managed to give the monks an interview without interrupting his painstaking arrangements for packing all that he

was taking home: 130 volumes on the rites of the Chinese government; the Chinese calendar and twelve volumes of studies concerning it (the Japanese would use that calendar for a century); ten volumes on music; a bronze tuning pipe; an iron sundial; twenty armor-piercing arrows; ten flat- trajectory arrows; the list went on and on. Neither Gembo nor Makibi offered the monks much guidance for their search.

It was autumn when the Japanese ambassador and his party left the capital for the long journey home--without the two monks and the others who had come to China to stay for years, but with Gembo and Makibi.

Back at Dazaifu, men waited anxiously. At last, a year and a half after the ships had sailed for China, word came by courier from the governor of Satsuma: the ambassador's ship had reached the island of Tane, about twenty miles south of Kyushu. A week later the ambassador and his aides arrived on horses provided by the governor; with them were Gembo and Makibi.

Dazaifu's officials extended themselves to make the travelers comfortable and to feed them well after the privation they had endured at sea. Outfitted with new clothing, rested and in good spirits, they set out for the capital to report to the emperor. The court was impressed by the accomplishments of Makibi and Gembo, grateful for the treasures they had brought. Gembo was promptly awarded an increase in stipend. Makibi was appointed to the faculty of the university and was made tutor to the emperor's daughter; three quick promotions in rank followed.

It was months before a second ship appeared. Much later it was learned that a third ship had been disabled and driven back to China, stranding its passengers to search for another ship to Japan. The fourth ship was less lucky: it had drifted far south to the area of Vietnam, where all but three or four of those on board were slaughtered by natives before the Chinese rescued them.

By then Dazaifu was in the grip of crisis. In the eighth month of 735 the Governor General dispatched by swift courier the first urgent message to the court. It stated that a killer disease was ravaging the population of Kyushu. Eleven days later he sent another emergency message: "A pestilence characterized by swellings has spread widely in the provinces under our jurisdiction. The whole populace is bedridden. We request exemption from the local products tax for this year." The request was granted.

The physician at Dazaifu did not feel confident enough to identify the disease but the medical officers at the court recognized the symptoms: a smallpox epidemic was raging on Kyushu.

Smallpox was not new to Japan. The history of smallpox begins in the densely populated Mediterranean area. From there nomads, traders, and invaders carried the disease east and west from one population center to another. Smallpox probably reached China by the fourth century.

Japan's isolation from the continent was a mixed blessing. It protected the islands from some of the great epidemics that swept China and Korea, but being protected meant that the Japanese did not develop the immunity that comes from continued exposure. Every new generation was vulnerable. When a disease like smallpox crossed to Japan, it was devastating. The government knew that, and standing orders directed officials in the provinces to report an epidemic by messengers speeded with the highest priority.

Epidemics hit hardest in heavily populated areas like advanced, productive northern Kyushu. The smallpox that broke out in 735 was more deadly because there had been famines in 732 and 733 and the prospects for the harvest of 735 were just as bleak: malnutrition had weakened the peasant population.

The government responded swiftly. It sent the medicines prescribed by Chinese practice. It broke precedent by authorizing the release of grain from government warehouses to the victims (previously grain had been released only in cases of famine). It ordered the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines on Kyushu to send up prayers to end the pestilence and alleviate the suffering. It directed the governors of the western provinces of Honshu to conduct purification rites to prevent the disease from jumping the strait to that island.

But by year's end it had jumped to Honshu and was spreading. The final entry in the court's chronicle for the year is grim: "In this year the harvest failed completely and from summer to winter the whole realm suffered from smallpox.... Those who died were many."

Through 736 the disease moved up along the Inland Sea. By 737 it was raging in the capital. In the third month the court called for powerful Buddhist measures: each province was ordered to make statues of the Buddha and his two attendants and to copy a scripture. In the sixth month the Council of State issued a long order to all provinces except those on Kyushu; Dazaifu didn't have to be told what it was up against. At a time when in Europe smallpox was often confused with other diseases which were attributed to astrological discord, the Japanese had identified and described this killer and could provide sensible instructions concerning care.

“Without fail, keep the patient warm. Never let him become chilled. When there is no floor, do not lie directly on the earth. Spread a straw mat on the ground and lie down to rest.”

High fever will make the “victim want to drink cold water. Firmly restrain him and do not let him drink ... water or suck ice.... Do not eat raw fish or fresh vegetables.

“Distresses which occur along with the infection are of four types. In some cases there are coughs, in some vomiting, in others regurgitation of blood, and yet others nosebleeds. Of all secondary illnesses, diarrhea is the worst. Be aware of this and strive diligently in personal care.... If diarrhea should develop, boil onions and scallions well,... mix in eight or nine parts of glutinous rice flour, boil, and drink while warm. Repeat this procedure two or three times. Also, eat either glutinous or non-glutinous rice as a thick gruel.”

The order concluded: “All in the capital district have been bedridden with this disease. Many have died. We are also aware that people in the provinces have been afflicted with this distress.... Each provincial governor should send [these instructions] along to his neighbor.... The provincial office shall make a tour of its jurisdiction and announce these instructions to the people.... When this order arrives, carry it out.”

The common people of the capital, crowded together, were hard hit; the aristocracy had more knowledge of the disease and to some extent could isolate themselves, but in this dread year even an imperial prince died. The business of the court was suspended because so many officials were ill. The powerful Fujiwara family had proliferated into four major branches; the head of each was struck down (the distraught court promoted one of them to Great Minister as he lay dying). The chronicle for 737 summed it up: “Through the summer and fall, people in the realm from aristocrats on down died one after another in countless numbers. In recent times, there has been nothing like this.”

Surviving records indicate that about one-third of Japan’s population died. In northern Kyushu, which was hit first and hardest and suffered for three straight years, two-thirds or more of the people died; it had been advanced and prosperous; it was relegated to a backwater. The death toll was greatest among adults in their productive, working years. The elderly, having survived a previous epidemic, had immunity; children were able to throw off the disease. The old and the young were left without family members to provide for them; many wandered homeless. Fields lay barren because there was no one to cultivate them. Farming was really the

country’s only industry, the sole source of the taxes that supported the ruling class. Taxes stopped flowing from much of the country.

It would be surprising if a disaster so great did not shake the government; It did.

The crisis in agriculture led to a fundamental shift in policy. Previously it was held that all of the country’s rice land belonged to the emperor, and that the government could shift people around to get maximum productivity--and taxes. The new law gave both aristocrats and peasants perpetual right to paddy land they had themselves cleared and brought into production. This introduction of private property was a difference with far-reaching consequences.

There was a new administration. With the Fujiwara leaders wiped out, men who had been outsiders came to power. Young men like Tabito’s son Otomo Yakamochi saw their friends take office, and hopes for their own careers brightened. Makibi fit smoothly into the new regime. Gembo was appointed the High Priest of Buddhism.

The emperor, Shomu by name, had not been an ardent Buddhist. He had been educated to be a Confucian ruler. Confucianism told him that if disasters fell upon a land it was because of faults in the ruler. In 732 Shomu attributed famine to “Our lack of virtue.” And he shouldered the blame for the epidemic in 735: “1 fear the responsibility is all mine.”

Shomu’s burden of guilt brought him to Buddhism, for Buddhism explains suffering, and it brought him close to Gembo, who provided solace. Under Gembo’s tutelage Shomu became one of the most ardent Buddhists in the long line of Japanese emperors.

Gembo was able to comfort Shomu in another way. The emperor was tormented by family discord. From the day Shomu was born, his mother rejected him, refused even to see him. The reasons are not known today; some think she suffered from severe depression. Makibi arranged that Gembo meet her, and Gembo was able to reconcile mother and son. For that he earned the gratitude and confidence of the emperor and the Fujiwara family too, for both Shomu~s mother and his consort were daughters of an eminent Fujiwara statesman.

Shomu’s predecessors had used Buddhism: used its doctrines and its appeal to bolster the government, to enhance the position of the emperor, to centralize power; they saw in it a useful tool and they kept it under tight control.

Shomu and his consort surrendered to Buddhism; it may have been Gembo who suggested that the lady change her name to Komyo, “The Light of the Buddha.” With Gembo as advocate and counselor, Shomu determined to spread Buddhism throughout the realm. A stream of decrees ordered that every province make Buddhist statues, copy scriptures, and erect seven-storied pagodas.

Then in 741 came the greatest project of all: to build in every province a national temple and a national nunnery. They were not to be modest chapels. With Gembo’s guidance Shomu specified that each temple would have a main hall enshrining statues of the Buddha and his attendants surrounded by the Four Heavenly Kings; the compounds were to include pagodas, a lecture hall, a belfry, a dining hall, monks’ quarters, and a main gate facing south. Each of the temples was to be staffed by twenty monks, who were to pray for the protection of the state. The nunneries, a little smaller, were each to have ten nuns who would pray for the atonement of sins. To build them, money was provided from the national treasury, the great families were pressured to contribute, and the peasants were to be drafted for labor; lands were assigned to each new temple to provide income.

The system was to be crowned by a headquarters temple in the capital. Named the Todaiji, it would enshrine a colossal bronze Buddha more than sixty feet high. Towering over worshipers in the soft light of the great hall, shimmering in its coat of gold, it would celebrate both the power of Buddha and the parallel power of the emperor and the state.

The miracle is that these temples, all across the country and in the capital, were actually built. In 741 the governors of the provinces must have winced when they received the orders and thought of the forced labor that would have to be exacted from the peasants. At Dazaifu, where Kanzeonji--mandated more than seventy years earlier by another emperor--was still unfinished, the Governor General wondered how to place another Buddhist burden on his smallpox- devastated provinces.

Dazaifu was in a state of shock. The year before it had been involved in a major rebellion and its future was in doubt. In 739 or early in 740 a scion of the Fujiwara family named Hirotsugu, son of one of the four leaders who had been taken by smallpox, was exiled to Dazaifu. Although the court humiliated him by putting him in the number three post, Junior Assistant Governor General, in the summer of 740 the top two positions were either vacant or the men assigned to them were enjoying life in the capital. Hirotsugu was in command.

Late in the eighth month the government was startled to receive from him an angry memorial harshly criticizing the administration and demanding that High

Priest Gembo and Minister Makibi be it eliminated." Before the court could reply, word came from other sources that Hirotsugu had raised an army and was leading almost all of Kyushu in rebellion.

The government issued a call for an army of 17,000 and appointed a general to command it. He at once dispatched a number of undercover agents, including Hayato, to infiltrate Kyushu with a call for loyalty. Fearing that they had been intercepted, he sent more agents a few days later with another imperial rescript:

"The traitor Hirotsugu was a wicked youth and came to do more and more evil as he grew up. His late father ... wanted to disinherit him, but We intervened. However, when he slandered his family, We sent him away and were awaiting his reform. Now it comes to Our ears that he has begun a ridiculous rebellion, causing suffering among the people. Because of his extreme disloyalty and lack of filial piety, the gods of heaven and earth will surely bring his destruction in a matter of days."

The message went on to promise a tempting reward to any man who slayed Hirotsugu. It ended, "Our imperial army is advancing on Kyushu."

Opinions of Hirotsugu differ sharply. Many believe that the rescript pained an accurate picture, that he was an irascible fellow whose own family was glad to get rid of him. Others see him as a sensitive man who was distraught by the deaths in his family and unhinged by conditions among the disease-ravaged population of Kyushu.

In the Kyushu tradition of disdain for central authority, both peasants and local magnates rallied to support him. They gave him an army of 15,000 men. He determined to use it, although his aims in going to war were vague in his own mind.

In the beginning he was only lashing out against Makibi, Gembo, and, through them, the prime minister. To him they were interlopers taking advantage of the decimated Fujiwara leadership. Gembo and Makibi seemed vulnerable. They were cohorts because of their years together in China. Their rapid rise to power had excited jealousy.

It was easy for him to dislike Makibi. He came from a provincial family-- distinguished in its own right, but provincial--and therefore he would forever be a coarse outsider. He was a formidable scholar (which did not impress Hirotsugu) but he was crusty and impatient of lesser minds. He did not cultivate the urbanity so important to a courtier.

Hirotsugu scorned Makibi but he hated Gembo. Priestly robes had not kept Gembo from womanizing. It was whispered that in ministering to the queen mother he had graduated from counselor to lover, and it was rumored that with Hirotsugu out of the way at Dazaifu, Gembo had targeted his attractive wife. Even if the lady did not complain to her husband, which some surmise that she did, the rumors would have reached Dazaifu.

Events moved quickly. With the first elements of his army the emperor's general marched swiftly to the tip of Honshu, across the strait from Kyushu. The emperor moved in the opposite direction. Shomu was not nearly as confident as he sounded in the rescript drafted for him. Fearful of Hirotsugu's friends in the capital, he fled. For four days he and his court (including young Otomo Yakamochi) slogged through rain and mud to what looked like a safer place.

Hirotsugu had devised what he regarded as a shrewd strategy. Under Dazaifu's command were three strongholds--fortified outposts with granaries and stores of weapons--one at the strait and two on Kyushu's Inland Sea coast facing Honshu. By securing them, he could add their garrisons to his force, get ample supplies, and deny those supplies to the government army. He foresaw no difficulty: those outposts were commanded by officers from the capital, like himself, he could count on them.

At Dazaifu he split his troops into three contingents and sent each marching toward one of those posts. He led the column heading for the fort close to the strait, thinking that probably the government army would cross there. Wherever it landed, his three forces would converge in attack. His own troops included Hayato warriors, and he had great faith in them. He felt confident.

A few years earlier his plan could have worked. Then the strongholds were manned by Frontier Guards; with no loyalties one way or the other, they would have fought as their officers ordered.

But the Frontier Guards had been disbanded and sent home. They were replaced by local soldiers.

At his headquarters on the strait the government general digested intelligence reports coming in from Kyushu, commandeered ships assembled for an embassy to Korea, and started moving his army across to Kyushu.

The government's undercover agents had done their work well. With a full repertory of bribes, promises, and threats, they had won over the local leaders along the coast. On their orders, their men manning the two Inland Sea strongholds

killed their Dazaifu officers and then ambushed and shattered Hirotsugu's advancing columns. The men in the outpost on the strait did not wait for Hirotsugu's arrival. When they saw the government soldiers landing they rushed to surrender.

Hirotsugu retreated with his troops to a position across a river and used Dazaifu's system of signal fires to try to raise more men. For fifteen days the opposing armies reconnoitered. The government general sent a titled emissary bearing a substantial gift of gold on a two-day journey to the eminent Shinto shrine at Usa. In the name of the emperor he asked the priests of Usa to pray for a government victory. Shrines and temples nearer at hand were of course asked to send up their prayers. Hirotsugu was doing the same thing. A number of priests had to resolve conflicts of interest, having accepted gold from both sides.

On a chilly day in late autumn the armies faced each other across the river. The government had come up with about 6,000 men of the 17,000 originally announced. Hirotsugu had them outnumbered with a force of 10,000, his trusted Hayato in the van.

In a preliminary skirmish, Hirotsugu sent some of his Hayato to cross the river on rafts. They were driven back by volleys of stone-tipped arrows. As they retreated, Hayato warriors with the government army called to their clansmen across the river: "Surrender! Surrender to the emperor's army! Save yourselves! Save your families!" Hirotsugu was dismayed to see his Hayato lower their bows.

That skirmish was a breach of decorum: the battle should not have begun without proper declamations.

Now the government's senior captain rode to the front of his troops and called to Hirotsugu. There was no answer. He called again. He called ten times before Hirotsugu rode forward.

"Hirotsugu hears the Emperor's messenger," he shouted. "Who is the messenger?"

The captain identified himself He was Saeki Tsunehito, the Saeki being a branch of the Otomo. The general and he were the Emperor's messengers, he called. They were present to hear Hirotsugu.

"Hirotsugu acknowledges the Emperor's messengers." He dismounted and bowed respectfully. "Hirotsugu does not rebel against the Emperor," he called.

“Hirotsugu dares not to defy the court. He requests only that two wicked men be expelled from the court. If Hirotsugu is a rebel may the heavenly gods strike him down!”

Saeki’s voice carried loud across the river. “Then why,” he shouted, “does Hirotsugu come with a huge army?”

There was no answer. On both sides of the river men waited, but there was no answer.

Hirotsugu rose, mounted his horse, and rode back to his army.

It was a dispiriting performance. Seeing it, Hirotsugu’s Hayato were taken aback. Suddenly three of them bolted for the river. Hayato from the government army rode forward to help them cross. Twenty more Hayato dashed to surrender, then some of Hirotsugu’s other troops. It was the beginning of a rout.

Hirotsugu escaped the battlefield and, almost alone, fled to the west, clear across the northern coast of Kyushu to its northwestern corner and to the Goto Islands that lie beyond. He did not run blindly, for that district is one where he might reasonably have hoped to get help. Its inhabitants were noted for their buccaneering spirit and truculent stance toward authority; the ancient chronicles stigmatize them as “earth-spiders” (perhaps because in prehistoric times they sensibly dwelled in caves for warmth in winter and coolness in summer) and cite victories over them by mythic emperors--empty victories if they occurred, since they changed nothing.

The fugitive did find help on one of the islands. For a price, seamen agreed to take him across to Korea. They almost made it, but then a storm rose and blew them back to where they’d started. Hirotsugu was quickly seized. Just six months after he raised his rebellion, he was executed.

That was not the end of the story, for, as a chronicle noted, “his spirit was not pacified.”

There was a powerful belief, shared by peasants and nobility alike, that the spirit of one who died in unnatural circumstances would roam the earth until it was appeased, either by taking revenge on its enemies or by the prayers and veneration of the living. The people of the district where Hirotsugu died promptly erected a temple to console his spirit with Buddhist prayer. A man who had been hunted down and executed by the government evoked sympathy among those contrary people. The temple’s name indicated that many

contributions went to build it.

In the meantime, the court, upset that its Distant Headquarters had harbored rebellion, took Draconian measures: it abolished Dazaifu and assigned its responsibilities to the governor of Chikuzen (Okura's old job). Two years later, with the realization that the governor of Chikuzen was in no position to control all Kyushu nor to handle the coming and going of diplomats, a military headquarters was set up to take over. In the next year, 745, realities were faced and Dazaifu was reestablished.

In that same year the government gave Hirotsugu's memorial temple official status by assigning a priest and setting aside rice lands to support it. This was an early sign that the Fujiwara were regaining influence. One of Hirotsugu's cousins was rising to prominence. He was Fujiwara Nakamaro and he had some scores to settle.

First he moved against Priest Gembo. Gembo and Makibi had not been dismissed as a result of Hirotsugu's charges, but his accusations cast a harsh light on them so that their standing at the court had eroded. In 745 Gembo was stripped of his title as High Priest and consigned to Dazaifu to complete the building of Kanzeonji. It was an empty assignment: the temple was all but finished. Gembo had little to do except, six months later, to preside at the dedication. When the ceremonies began and it came time for his stately entrance, his escorts found only a headless corpse.

In the minds of most people there was no question: the vengeful spirit of Hirotsugu had prevailed. The man utilized by the spirit to run the sword through Gembo was never apprehended; in the crowd gathered for the dedication ceremonies it was easy for him to slip away. It was taken for granted that he was either a loyal follower of Hirotsugu or a hired assassin sent by Nakamaro. Some say that on the day the hit man returned to the capital, Gembo's severed head was thrown over the wall into the family temple of the Fujiwara.

Behind Kanzeonji there is a solitary grave, very old, with a stone of the kind that marks a priest's grave. People say that Gembo is buried there. I stop sometimes to say a prayer.

In 750, five years after Gembo was exiled, Nakamaro managed to dislodge Kibi Makibi from the court and send him to be governor of Chikuzen. Brief service there left Makibi healthy, so Nakamaro had him shifted to Hizen, the province where Hirotsugu had met his end
and where his tormented spirit was surely most potent.

It is said that Nakamaro, wanting to make doubly sure, dispatched a secret agent to eliminate Makibi as Gembo had been eliminated, but that the frustrated killer returned to report that it was hopeless: Makibi had surrounded himself with an airtight defense and to further confound his enemies he was personally offering prayers at Hirotsugu's memorial temple. To which Nakamaro replied: "That's Makibi!--very different from Gembo, who was led astray by sex.

In the next year, 751, Makibi received a new assignment, one that his friends hoped would rejuvenate his career and his enemies hoped would get rid of him permanently. Another mission was to be sent to China, the first since the one that had brought Makibi and Gembo home seventeen years earlier. Makibi was to go.

The four ships that carried the embassy reached China in the summer of 752 but it was autumn before they arrived in the capital. One of the two monks had died. The survivor, named Fusho, hurried to meet his countrymen. He first begged an audience with the ambassador, a Fujiwara with the manner and appearance of a true aristocrat, but who seemed so indifferent that Fusho cut short his story and bowed out.

He then sought out Makibi, the number two man of the mission. Makibi listened, but seemed little moved, as Fusho poured out his story. He told how, after years of effort, the two of them had been able to meet Ganjin, one of China's great masters of Buddhism, hoping that he would recommend someone to go to Japan.

Ganjin was then fifty-five, a sturdy man with a wide brow, large eyes, a prominent nose, and a generous mouth. He received them with more than thirty of his disciples ranged behind him.

He listened to their plea and then turned to face his disciples. The voyage would be dangerous, he said, but it would be for the good of Buddhism, and a Buddhist should not be reluctant to risk his life. He asked three times who would answer the call. There was no response.

"Since none of you will go, I shall," he said, and from among the disciples bowed before him he named seventeen who would accompany him.

There was still a problem, Fusho told Makibi. Ganjin was so important that the Chinese government would never authorize his leaving. However, the two Japanese monks had been able to arrange a meeting with the prime minister. Fusho chose his words carefully:
"He was a clever man. I think he enjoyed intrigue." For the first

time, Makibi showed a flicker of interest. “Though it was illegal, he secretly issued an authorization for us to depart.”

Fusho went on with his story. A ship was built, Ganjin assembled a long list of ritual items to be taken along, and they decided to sail in the spring of 743, when the seasonal winds would be favorable. They were delayed for almost two months because the coastal waters were infested with pirates; no ships could leave. Then, just before they were to sail, they were betrayed by one of the Chinese monks who thought he was going to be left behind because he had behaved deplorably in the fleshpots of the port. The police seized their ship and their cargo, and the two Japanese spent the summer in prison, until a letter from the prime minister set them free.

Gan in took it all philosophically. He was determined to go to Japan, he told the Japanese, and he would finance the voyage. A few monks dropped out but Ganjin added artisans--painters, sculptors, jade workers, embroiderers--and he assembled all kinds of religious articles: Buddhist texts, images, paintings, banners, rugs, clerical robes, shoes, chairs, canopies, and incense, as well as medicines, perfumes, pepper, sugar, honey, and coins.

On a moonlit night in late December they sailed down the Yangtze River. Bad weather forced them to moor off a coastal island for a month. When they set out again, high waves caught them as they tried to find their way through the islands. Their ship was dashed onto rocks and broke up. Passengers and crew escaped to a sand spit but all their cargo was washed away. A week later a patrol ship picked them up. On the quiet sail back to the coast Ganjin began to plan a third attempt.

They were confined in a monastery near the port. The monks there begged Ganjin to lecture and administer the vows, and the Japanese experienced the excitement of learning from one of Buddhism’s great figures. To prevent Ganjin from leaving China, the monks of the monastery instigated the arrest of Fusho’s companion, whom they took to be the ringleader. He was shackled around the neck and sent off to the capital, but the prime minister, loath to see any chicanery of his go awry, intervened again. The monk was back within a month, equipped with a forged letter stating that he had fallen ill and died. He was now officially a free spirit.

Determined to make another attempt, Ganjin led his group on the long walk toward their original port of departure. They were almost there when the authorities descended upon them. One of Ganjin’s senior disciples, out of concern for his master’s safety, had petitioned the government to prevent his leaving China

on the grounds that he was too valuable an asset to lose. Ganjin was put in the custody of the monastery where he still held the position of chief priest, and with that their venture collapsed. Ganjin told the Japanese that he still was determined to go to Japan but it would be years before they could dare to make another attempt. As the year 744 drew to a close they said goodbye.

Four years passed before they thought it safe to visit him again. They found him as vigorous as ever. This time, he told them, they would succeed. A new ship was built and they assembled cargo like that they carried before.

On a summer night in 748 they again sailed down the Yangtze. Among the islands of the estuary they were becalmed for two months. When winds came and carried them out to sea they were hit by a tempest. They survived but drifted helpless. They finally ended on the island of Hainan, south of continental China, across Tonkin Bay from Vietnam. They were roughly two and a half times farther from Japan than when they started out.

It was more than a year before they made it back to the mainland, and another year to make the long journey up the coast, slowed everywhere by appeals for Ganjin's ministrations. Along the way, Fusho's companion died, exhausted, and Ganjin, losing his sight from cataracts, submitted to an operation by a reputedly skilled Arabian; the operation failed and Ganjin was left totally blind and exhausted. He was still set on keeping his vow to go to Japan, he told Fusho as they parted in the summer of 750, but they needed a long rest before trying again.

That was his story up till now, Fusho told Makibi, and he was disappointed. From his long years in China, Makibi must have been aware of Ganjin's eminence, but he displayed no interest in getting him to Japan. Instead he appeared to be irritated at hearing about their unsuccessful attempts. A successful voyage, he lectured sternly, depended on proper preparation and competent navigation. Fusho left disheartened. Makibi had changed, he thought. The scholar had become a starchy bureaucrat.

Third in command of the Japanese mission was Vice Ambassador Otomo Komaro, Tabito's nephew, Yakamochi's cousin, one of the two who had rushed to Dazaifu when Tabito thought he was dying. Komaro had never heard of Ganjin but he was moved by Fusho's story. Fusho had finally found an ally.

The Japanese settled in to spend the winter at the Chinese capital. Fusho was shocked to learn that at the emperor's New Year's reception the ambassador had created a rumpus. Finding that the ambassador from Silla Korea was ranked highest among the guests, he made such an unseemly display that he was granted

first place. Fusho knew that the Chinese court must have been irked. China asked little from the barbarian subject-states on its fringe except that they keep the peace among themselves. The rancor between Japan and Korea was an irritation.

When summer came the Japanese began preparations to leave. True to his word, Otomo Komaro initiated a request that Ganjin and his followers be permitted to accompany them. This time the Chinese made no objection, but then the emperor, an ardent Taoist with an antipathy toward Buddhism, insisted that if Ganjin went, Taoist priests must go too. Confucianism was already deep-rooted in Japan, Buddhism was planted, and Taoist ideas had penetrated, but the Japanese had no wish to accept the institutions of Taoism. They withdrew their petition. Once again, Ganjin, his monks, and his artisans would have to depart illegally.

At first the ambassador took them aboard his ship, but then he got cold feet and ordered them off. It was Otomo Komaro who secretly defied the ambassador and overloaded his ship by taking them all
aboard.

The first leg of the journey was anticlimactic; a week of smooth sailing brought three of the four ships to Okinawa: the ambassador's, Makibi's, and Komaro's. There they were delayed two weeks, first by a storm, then by dead calm. When they set out, the ambassador's ship promptly ran aground, stuck on a reef. He signaled the other two ships to go on.

Komaro's ship with Fusho and Ganjin reached Yaku Island the next day. They were now only about fifty miles from the southern tip of Kyushu, but they had to wait ten days for favorable winds. The day after they sailed they ran into a gale and for two days were tossed about by mountainous waves. Fusho and Ganjin remained calm. They had been through much worse. On a crisp, sunny winter afternoon they sailed into the harbor of Akimeya, a fishing village in the southwestern corner of Satsuma province. Word was rushed to the governor of Satsuma, horses were provided, and Komaro and his aides set out at once for Dazaifu. The next morning the governor arrived to greet Ganjin and to provide an escort to guide the party and arrange accommodations. Five days of riding on good horses brought them to Dazaifu.

They were welcomed, congratulated, honored. The New Year was almost upon them. They were caught up in its festivities. They conducted services at Kanzeonji and, not far away, at the newly built national temple for Chikuzen Province, one of those that the Emperor Shomu had ordered to be erected in each province. Early in their stay they learned that Makibi's ship had reached Satsuma not long after theirs but had sailed on; Makibi hoped to be the first to reach Nara

and report the completion of their mission. He was disappointed to find that Komaro beat him to the capital.

Although Makibi chose not to stop at Dazaifu he laid a chore on it. Shortly after his first return from China, in 735, Dazaifu had been ordered to erect signposts on the islands stretching southward from Kyushu to Okinawa. Each sign would bear the name of its island, the location of anchorages, places to get good water, and the courses from there, with distances. Sailing through those islands this year, he was not pleased with what he found. Not long after he reached Nara, Dazaifu received an order to repair or replace those signposts. Makibi detested sloppy administration.

Dazaifu may have found out for itself about those signs. It had sent a team along the southern islands to Okinawa to inquire about the ambassador's ship. They learned that the ship had sailed from Okinawa but that nothing was known of it after that. Four months after Komaro's ship arrived with Ganjin and Fusho, the fourth ship reached the Satsuma coast, brightening hopes for the ship still missing. It was years before the Japanese learned what happened to it. Like Fusho's and Ganjin's ship in 748, it had been blown far south to Indochina, ending on the coast of Annam, today's Vietnam. There were only about a dozen survivors, including the ambassador. They made it back to the Chinese capital but none ever got home to Japan.

Meanwhile, Ganjin had been given a savior's welcome at Nara. Makibi, who in China had not seemed overly concerned about getting the master to Japan, was chosen to deliver the Retired Emperor Shomu's declaration: "You, exalted monk, came to Our nation from far across the dark green sea. Indeed, My prayers have been answered ... My heart now rejoices.... I place wholly in your trust, hereafter, the administering of vows and the regulation of monasticism."

Ganjin had brought with him an ordination platform from a prominent Buddhist monastery in China. In the Todaiji, the new national temple that Shomu and Gembo had envisioned, the craftsmen who had come with Ganjin reassembled the platform before the Great Buddha, still a somber presence, for as yet not enough gold had been found to complete the gilding (the mission to China had been asked to bring back gold to finish the job; it was on the ambassador's ship).

On this first ordination platform in Japan, Ganjin administered the vows to the Retired Emperor Shomu, his consort the Empress Dowager Kogyo, their daughter Empress Koken, whom Shomu had chosen to succeed him on the throne, and more than four hundred monks. In an aura of splendor, on a balmy spring day full of joy and promise, the prescribed rites of ordination arrived in Japan.

A temple was especially built for Ganjin. He named it the Toshodaiji. It still stands, one of Nara's great monuments. Among its treasures are superb sculptures, including a powerful statue of Ganjin done by artists who came with him from China. He is shown seated in meditation, eyes closed to denote his blindness. He lived out his life in the Toshodaiji, lecturing and administering the vows to countless monks who came to him.

Things did not go that smoothly in politics. Fujiwara Nakamaro, who had succeeded in getting Gembo out of the way though he failed with Makibi, was determined to restore Fujiwara control over the government. The Empress Koken was his aunt and a willing accomplice. She doted on him, and schemes that couldn't be aired before court officials were cozily discussed in the imperial bed.

On trumped-up charges they forced into retirement the non-Fujiwara men who had assumed power when the smallpox epidemic wiped out the Fujiwara leaders, and after Shomu died they used the same tactics to oust his choice for crown prince and then install Nakamaro's compliant young son-in-law as next in line to the throne.

The men who had enjoyed a measure of influence while Fujiwara power was in eclipse foresaw all their gains wiped out if they did not act. They plotted a military coup. Otomo Komaro was one of the leaders and most of the Otomo were involved, but not the head of the family, Tabito's son Yakamochi. He refused to join.

Within a circle as small and ingrown as the court at Nara, it was almost impossible to keep a secret. Nakamaro got wind of the plot and acted first. Komaro and twelve others were tortured to death, their immediate families were killed, and more than four hundred others were exiled. Yakamochi and the remnant of the Otomo were left to grieve.

Kibi Makibi, who might have been in the middle of the plot had he been in the capital, was saved, quite unintentionally, because Nakamaro had shunted him off to the number two spot at Dazaifu. It was a post beneath his rank, but he was actually in command because the position of Governor General was filled by an exile denied power or responsibility; that unfortunate was Nakamaro's brother, who was being insulted because he had known about the plot but had not revealed it.

At Dazaifu Makibi kept busy. Educator at heart, he revitalized the adjacent school for the young heirs of the Kyushu gentry and, to keep an eye on things, did some teaching himself.

Reports coming in to Dazaifu from China told of rebellion and warfare. Nakamaro saw this as an excuse to bolster his power with a military buildup. Makibi was ordered to prepare for the defense of Dazaifu and in 756 he was directed to build a new fort on Kyushu's northern coast as a base for an invasion of Korea. New weapons poured in to Dazaifu.

Nakamaro requisitioned five hundred warships; he ordered forty young people from areas settled by Korean immigrants to learn the Korean language so as to facilitate invasion; and he scheduled a grand military review of 40,700 troops and 394 ships. More than once Makibi was ordered to prepare for large troop movements.

It all came to nothing. Makibi's new fort was abandoned as soon as it was completed. There was no invasion of Korea.

Instead, Fujiwara Nakamaro found himself on the defensive. People who had almost forgotten Gembo were forcefully reminded of him when a mesmeric priest named Dokyo healed Empress Koken, retired and ailing, and replaced Nakamaro as her lover. Newly invigorated, she announced that she would resume control of affairs of state, relegating Nakamaro's son-in-law, who is known as the Emperor Junnin, to a figurehead.

Nakamaro now saw a use for the troops he had mobilized. He brought them into the capital to enforce his demand that Koken dismiss Dokyo and return to quiet retirement.

Koken and Dokyo moved faster. She dismissed Nakamaro, confiscated his lands, and sent imperial troops chasing after him in a strategy masterminded by Makibi, who had been recalled from Dazaifu and who must have derived great satisfaction from this assignment. Nakamaro fled to the northeast and, like a replay of his cousin Hirotsugu's demise, tried to escape in a boat across Lake Biwa, was driven back by a storm, and was captured and executed. Makibi was rewarded with the lofty position of Minister of the Right.

Dokyo persuaded Koken to mount the throne again, taking a new name: this second time around she became the Empress Shotoku. She at once put Dokyo in charge of both the government and the Buddhist hierarchy. The unfortunate Emperor Junnin, forced to abdicate, was exiled to Awaji Island, where he became a major tourist attraction until it was expedient to do him in. (It was given out that he was trying to escape.)

Plots grew like weeds and sorceresses were in great demand. In these tense times, it appears that Kibi Makibi's talents were again put to use. From Dazaifu, where Makibi had associates and influence, came a message sent by its chief priest of Shinto (who in theory outranked all other officials there): it said that the powerful Shinto Hachiman deity of Usa had in an oracle revealed that if Dokyo became emperor the country would be blessed with peace and prosperity. The empress was taken aback but agreed with Dokyo that a courtier of high rank should be dispatched to Usa to confirm this astonishing pronouncement. The delegate returned in a hurry to report that the deity had stated in no uncertain terms that in Japan from time immemorial there had been a clear distinction between ruler and subject, that never had a subject become sovereign, that only a member of the imperial family could become emperor, and that by coveting the throne Dokyo had angered the deities of the nation.

Many surmised that Makibi and a few other nobles had concocted the whole affair to tempt Dokyo into revealing his ambition, and so to get rid of him. Dokyo hung on a few months more, but when the empress died he was banished to a province in the distant north, about as far away as the courtiers of Nara could conceive of exile. The usual purpose was announced: he was to build a temple there. He died in a year or so, but unlike Gembo he died of natural causes.

A few months after Dokyo was exiled Kibi Makibi resigned his high position and retired full of honor. He was a survivor.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Years 803-835

Principal Characters
Fujiwara Kadonomaru, Ambassador to China
Saicho, Buddhist priest, founder of the Tendai sect
The Emperor Kammu
Kukai, Buddhist priest, founder of the Shingon sect
Hui-Kuo, Seventh Patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism
The Emperor Heizei
The Emperor Saga

Four spanking new ships swayed in the tide of Naniwa harbor (now the port of Osaka). On this balmy spring day in 803 the roadstead was busy. The members of a mission to China were boarding the ships: the ambassador, his entourage, and the Buddhist monks, scholars, artists, musicians, and craftsmen being sent for study of a few months or several years. Already aboard were contingents of soldiers, in case pirates should appear.

Planning for this embassy had begun two years earlier, when the ambassador, vice-ambassador, and an administrative officer and a secretary for each ship were appointed. Since then, the ships had been built, the lavish gifts for the Chinese emperor and court had been assembled, the other members of the mission chosen.

The ambassador was Fujiwara Kadonomaru, a polished courtier from the elite branch of the Fujiwara; at the time of his appointment he was concluding a two-year term as Senior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu, a post that presumably gave him experience in foreign relations. His subordinates were carefully chosen with both breeding and ability in mind; it was essential that they make a good impression, for every mission to China was intended to confirm Japan’s position as a civilized nation.

The next day was filled with going and coming between ships and shore as last-minute wrinkles were ironed out, last-minute items delivered. Men on board thought of home and family. It was a lovely time of year. The cherry blossoms were long gone--how many wondered if they would ever seem them again?--but iris and azaleas were in full bloom. Tears had been shed at the many farewell banquets and at the private goodbyes; gazing at the shore, eyes misted over again.

On the following day they sailed, the ambassador's ship in the lead, the others trailing. One wonders if weather-wise seamen were comfortable about that departure, if the diviners had approved. For two days later, while they were still in the Inland Sea, they were struck by a devastating storm. One ship sank with the loss of almost all aboard. Two battered ships, including the ambassador's, made it back to Naniwa. One ship sailed through the storm and made it to Hakata.

Aboard that luckiest, or best-handled, ship was the vice-ambassador and an eminent Buddhist priest named Saicho. Saicho came with impeccable credentials: his patron was the Emperor Kammu. During most of the twenty-five years since the previous mission to China, Kammu had been preoccupied with internal polities He had twice moved the capital, first from Nara to Nagaoka, and then, when that site was blighted by violence and scandal, to Heian, today's Kyoto. His leaving Nara is often attributed to his desire to break free from interference in court affairs by the powerful priests of the Nara temples, especially from the conniving of corrupt priests like Gembo and Dokyo, but it is also true that Heian was the base of the rising Fujiwara clan, while the strongholds of the older clans like the Otomo were around Nara.

At Heian a mountain called Hiei lay in the northeast, and northeast, according to ancient wisdom, was the direction from which evil and danger threatened. Priest Saicho had already built a chapel on Hiei. Soon after his ordination he had fled the distractions and worldliness of the Nara temples, and for seventeen years he had been studying and meditating on Hiei, immersing himself in a doctrine called Tendai; he was convinced that Tendai was superior to the tenets taught at Nara.

Since Saicho was established on Hiei, in a position to block peril to the new capital, it seems almost inevitable that he and his temple would be favored by the court. An influential official introduced Saicho to the emperor and arranged that Saicho give a series of lectures on Tendai. The emperor and crown prince may have attended; on completion of the lectures they sent congratulations, and not much later the emperor sent word that he supported Tendai and would help to propagate it.

Saicho took the opportunity to request permission to join the mission to China, pointing out that for Tendai to be accepted in Japan it would have to be presented by someone who had studied at the source. Kammu consented. Saicho was to stay in China for the few months that the embassy would be there and return with it; he would be accompanied by a monk who spoke Chinese to serve as interpreter.

When their ship anchored at Hakata the passengers disembarked to rest at the reception center. During days of anxious waiting, Saicho and his disciple prayed almost unceasingly for the safety of the others. At last came word of what had happened. It was clear that their wait would be a long one. The vice-ambassador, the administrative officer, and most of the passengers were moved to the Dazaifu headquarters, Saicho and his disciple to Kanzeonji.

Saicho was quick to realize that the delay gave him a chance to get acquainted with a region new to him but rich in history. This was the gateway where Buddhist priests first entered Japan, sent by the king of Paekche to knit spiritual ties between Paekche and Yamato; here they had first prayed and preached. Here the towering presence of Ganjin was first felt. Here was the home of Usa Hachiman, the first native deity to ally himself with Buddhism when he journeyed to Nara to join in dedicating and venerating the Great Buddha. And here was Dazaifu, the powerful sub-capital that linked the court with the world.

Shortly after Saicho took up residence at Kanzeonji, the ranking officer at Dazaifu, the Senior Assistant Governor General, came to pay his respects. In his party was the captain of the military, who offered to escort Saicho on an inspection of the water-gate and the fortified mountain that rose behind headquarters and temple. The next day horses were brought and they rode out. Saicho was impressed by both constructions, but from both his gaze turned frequently to the changing view of the peak called Homan.

For one thing, Homan lay in the same direction from Dazaifu that his own Mount Hiei did from the capital: it blocked the path of danger. But Homan's magnetism went beyond that. There are mountains in Japan that demand respect. Something about them--heir form, their place in the landscape, the way they confront man--insists on veneration, and the Japanese have venerated them. Homan was, and is, such a mountain. Saicho knew he had to go to Homan.

The priests at Kanzeonji told him that when Dazaifu was planned its builders and their priests enshrined eight million sacred images on the mountain in supplication to the myriad gods for protection (Saicho understood "eight million" to be symbolic, and impressive).

He was told of the legendary priest Shinren who in those anxious times secluded himself on the mountain for ascetic practice. As he prayed one day he sensed an ineffable fragrance and a brilliant light in which a noble lady manifested herself. She announced that she was the deity Tamayori, a daughter of the god of the sea, and that she had long resided on Homan, guarding the country from invasion with an arsenal that included false signal lights, mountainous waves, and

gales that capsized ships. Then in swirling clouds she transformed herself into a Buddhist deity of fierce mien and disappeared on a nine-headed dragon-horse, leaving a hoofprint deep in the rock that Shinren faced. It astonished neither Saicho nor his hosts at Kanzeonji that a native, Shinto god should be also a Buddhist deity, and Saicho realized that at the foot of Homan he would find, harmoniously side by side, a Buddhist temple and a Shinto shrine.

To guide Saicho to Homan three Kanzeonji monks were chosen from the fittest, so that they would not slow the athletic thirty-six-year-old Saicho. Homan is not a high mountain, about 2,800 feet, but the climb is steep and the path, especially as it approaches the summit, is a jumble of jagged boulders. To the dismay of the Kanzeonji monks, neither Saicho nor his disciple stopped to catch their breath.

Saicho had been chanting mystic sounds all the while he climbed, and his practiced eye spotted the place where Shinren must have worshiped before the breathless Kanzeonji monks could point out the hoofprint left by Tamayori's steed. He looked into eaves, saw symbols scratched into the walls by holy men at their devotions. He was led a short distance along the ridge line to another peak, as high as Homan but very different, gentle and grass-covered. A little mound, the monks said, was Shinren's grave. Saicho led them in prayers of benediction.

Where would the ridge line take him, he asked. They answered that it led almost due east to another sacred peak, higher than Homan, called Mount Hiko. From Hiko, by continuing in the same direction, one could reach the shrine of Usa Hachiman. There was an animated discussion among the monks as to how far it was to Hiko. They could only agree that it was "very far." None of them had ever walked it, but a sinking feeling told them they were going to, struggling to keep up with this formidable priest who was the emperor's favorite. Saicho, listening quietly, deduced that he could do it in a day (it is about twenty- five miles) and determined to do it soon.

He did. He worshiped at Hiko's three peaks, each enshrining a different deity, and was informed that two of Japan's most sacred mountains, one having first risen in India, the other in China, had rested at Hiko on their flights to their new homeland.

He went on to Hachiman's shrine at Usa, and found a great complex of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples ranging up a slope to the holiest precincts. The priests of Usa made him an honored guest for several days of pomp and ceremony. As he listened to the history of the shrine, Saicho was disturbed by the thought that Hachiman, this deity so deeply Japanese. had migrated from Korea

centuries earlier with an influx of people from Paekche. When he left, some Usa priests guided him on the two-day walk to Mount Kawara, whose deity was openly called Korean. Feeling that it was appropriate to appeal to a deity who himself had crossed the sea, Saicho here prayed with special fervor that the mission to China might proceed in safety.

Through summer, autumn, and winter Saicho traveled northern Kyushu. Wherever he went, the force of his personality and the power of his message brought temples, priests, and people to Tendai, including Kanzeonji. Still today, the religion of the region bears his mark.

Dazaifu was kept informed of progress in restoring the embassy: a new ship built, the other two repaired and refitted; men appointed to replace those lost; another set of costly gifts procured. In the spring came word that a second departure was imminent.

The year's delay had made it possible for another priest to join the mission, a young monk named Kukai. Apparently he was accepted at the last minute: he was ordained only a few days before departure. Perhaps he had difficulty getting permission: he was from the Saeki family on Shikoku; the Saeki were a branch of the Otomo and both were in bad odor because of involvement in the killing and intrigue that aborted the construction of a new capital at Nagaoka. Kukai's announced intention was to stay in China for twenty years. He was quartered on Ambassador Kadonomaru's ship.

The crew of the ship anchored in Hakata Bay had readied it, the officers and passengers reassembled at the reception center. The priests at Kanzeonji bade Saicho and his disciple a tearful farewell and began marathon prayers for a safe voyage.

The favored route--across the Japan Sea to skirt the Korean peninsula--was no longer possible because of bitter relations with Silla, so they decided to leave Japan not from Hakata but from a harbor on Kyushu's west coast. From it they would head into the China Sea, hoping to reach a port they called Ningpo. Japanese mariners then had only the flimsiest knowledge of navigation. They relied on winds blowing generally in the right direction and were favored by the fact that China is so big it was hard to miss. They sailed almost exactly a year after their first departure from Naniwa.

Their luck had not changed. On their second day out they ran into a gale. The ships were scattered and lost track of each other. Kukai wrote: "A fierce storm struck us.... ripping our sail and breaking our rudder. Waves tossed our small

boat.... We cringed before the terrible wind, terrified that the great waves might wash us away.... We drifted north and south and saw nothing but the blue of sky and sea.... Our water was exhausted, our crew fatigued.... How can words describe our plight?”

The third and fourth ships were forced back to Japan. The vice-ambassador’s ship, with Saicho aboard, reached China but only after almost two months of rowing, drifting, and near-starvation. They were warmly received, but soon after their arrival the vice-ambassador died, prostrated by the cruel voyage. The administrative officer took over.

The ambassador’s ship, with Kukai, reached China sooner, after thirty- four days at sea, but three hundred miles south of their intended port. As usual, the Japanese had not provided the ambassador with the diplomatic documents the Chinese court prescribed, because such documents had to acknowledge subservience to the Chinese emperor; the Japanese tried to maintain that they were not subjects but equals, though they did label their gifts as “tribute.” Without credentials, at a port that had never received an embassy, they were suspected of being merchants who were trying to evade customs duties by claiming diplomatic status. The official in charge tossed away Ambassador Kadonomaru’s appeal because its Chinese was not acceptable; they were treated badly until Kukai saved them with an eloquent petition written in refined Chinese. Still, it took a long time for clearance to arrive from the central authorities, and it was late autumn before they began a forty-six day journey to the Chinese capital. There the two groups were united. Saicho was not among them. Once ashore, he and his disciple had set off for T’ien-t’ai, the mountain that gave Tendai its name, and the center of Tendai studies.

In the capital, Ch’ang-an, Ambassador Kadonomaru kept Kukai in his official party as he worked through the protocol of his mission: the presentation of the gifts, a formal audience with the emperor along with representatives from Tibet and other kingdoms, another audience at which the Japanese requested and were granted permission for their many students to remain in China, a round of banquets with much drinking, and, of course, sightseeing. To the Japanese, Ch’ang-an was a dazzling, cosmopolitan city. With a population of almost two million, it was the greatest metropolis in the world, a magnet for embassies, scholars, and merchants from all of Asia and the Middle East. But it was also a jittery city. The emperor’s long reign had been marred by domestic revolts and foreign attacks; the T’ang dynasty was weakening.

The Japanese were in Ch’ang-an into the winter and the New Year’s festivities. Early in the year they joined in mourning the death of the emperor, and

participated in the enthronement of the new emperor. It was an event that seemed less than auspicious: the new sovereign was ill and disabled, a weakened emperor of a weakening regime. When Ambassador Kadonomaru got home, his report on China would state: “Internally, there are disloyal commanders, and externally, the evil-natured men of Tibet. The capital is in chaos, with not a moment of tranquility.”

On the day that the ambassador left Ch’ang-an, Kukai moved into a complex of temples where political turbulence seemed far away. There he hoped to find the master he had come to China searching for, the master who could teach him the secrets of a new current in Buddhism; it had originated in India and was called Esoteric Buddhism. It was not unknown in Japan. Deep in the mountains of his home island, Shikoku, Kukai had for fifty solitary days and nights practiced an austere ritual of Esoteric Buddhism that he had learned at Nara. He performed this fifty-day ritual once, twice, again and again, until at last, on a rocky promontory thrust into the Pacific, he broke through to enlightenment.

He had found the kind of Buddhism that he believed was superior to all others, but the texts in Japan were incomplete and he knew that the essential teachings could only be learned in person, master to disciple. He was searching for that master.

For Saicho, the months in China had been fruitful. Near Mount T’ien-t’ai he was welcomed by the governor of the province, a supporter of Tendai who was sponsoring a series of lectures by a distinguished monk; he invited Saicho and his disciple to attend, and was so impressed by Saicho that he gave him four thousand sheets of paper and provided twenty scribes who copied 120 texts. On T’ien-t’ai the two Japanese received instruction, and before they returned to the port for the voyage home they were fully ordained in Tendai.

At the port, they found that sailing would be delayed six weeks while provisions for the trip were collected, and Saicho received permission to visit another Buddhist center famed for its libraries. There he was able to get copies of Esoteric texts and was initiated in Esoteric rites. The Chinese masters of Tendai taught only Tendai doctrine, but Saicho, having been exposed to Esoteric practice in Japan, was eager to learn more; he saw no conflict between Tendai and Esoteric doctrines and he wanted to combine them in a Japanese synthesis.

In the early summer of 805 the two ships left China for an uneventful voyage home. In the capital Ambassador Kadonomaru returned his sword of office and was rewarded for his success. Saicho was welcomed by the emperor and honored for his achievements and for the texts and images he brought home. The

Emperor Kammu gave Tendai--with its Japanese infusion of Esoteric practices --official recognition as a sect. Saicho's mission to China had been a success: Tendai was firmly established, the aristocracy of the court embraced it.

Dazaifu celebrated the return of the two ships and hastily dispatched the two that had been blown back a year earlier. They were still loaded with valuable goods that it would be a shame to waste and, although the original diplomatic mission had been accomplished, there was now the excuse of sending congratulations to the new emperor. The Japanese habitually mixed diplomacy and trade. It was expected that the ships would conduct some sub rosa commerce, but the official gift-giving was in itself highly profitable, since the Chinese always reciprocated with items of greater value. The things that Ambassador Kadonomaru had brought back were being happily apportioned by the emperor and high officials even as the two ships set out.

As before, they soon ran into trouble. One ship was able to continue but the other was disabled and drifted to a lonely island. Most of those on board went ashore, leaving only a few archers to guard the ship. Its hawsers snapped, it drifted out to sea, ship and all on board were lost. Those marooned on the island made it back to Kyushu, probably picked up by passing fishermen; the court ordered that they be severely punished for losing their ship and valuable cargo; it took no note of the lives lost.

The remaining ship made it to China and its administrative officer and his party entered Ch'ang-an early in 806. Their congratulations to the emperor enthroned a year earlier came too late; he was already dead and his son was on the throne.

But for Kukai their arrival was opportune. He had visited many Buddhist teachers until at last he met Hui-kuo, the seventh patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism in a line that had originated in India. With open arms, the aged Hui-kuo welcomed him as the disciple he had been waiting for, and immediately began to pass on all that he had to offer. Kukai's years of lonely study and ascetic practice, and his phenomenal memory, made him amazingly quick. Three months later he was ordained as Hui-kuo's successor, the eighth patriarch and head of Esoteric Buddhism. Hui-kuo, near death, told him to return to Japan and transmit the teachings there. From all of Hui-kuo's disciples it was Kukai who was chosen to write the master's epitaph. His work in China was completed. He was ready to go home.

That remaining ship of the mission returned to Hakata in the late fall of 806. The administrative officer hurried to the capital. Along with his report, he carried

Kukai's memorial to the court. It included a list of all that he had brought from China: Buddhist sutras, Sanskrit texts, lengthy commentaries, images and paintings, ritual instruments, and gifts he had received from Hui-kuo.

But his memorial was more than a list of treasures. It was a report of what he had achieved as a government-sponsored student in China, and what his achievement had prepared him to do for Japan. He described how he had succeeded Hui-kuo as the authentic transmitter of Esoteric Buddhism. In essence, he was petitioning for recognition of Esoteric Buddhism as a new sect--implying that it was superior to existing sects--and he was asking that he himself be recognized as head of that sect. A new sect had to be sanctioned by the government. Without government approval it did not exist, it could not function.

He was asking much, and circumstances were not favorable. Approval was in the hands of what amounted to a council of bishops whose ideas were firmly planted in the previous century. Moreover, Saicho was already performing Esoteric rituals and was accepted as a master. The Emperor Kammu, who had authorized Kukai's journey to China, had died and been succeeded by his son Heizei. Heizei was not an ardent Buddhist, and what enthusiasm he had was focused on Saicho; when he was crown prince he had given Saicho several hundred ounces of gold to help cover his expenses in China.

Having submitted his memorial, Kukai waited. He could not even travel to the capital without authorization. Like Saicho, he rusticated in Kyushu, but unlike Saicho, he had no great sponsor. He was in limbo.

To house and protect the treasures he had brought from China he built a small building not far from where he had landed. He installed an altar, making it a temple, and called it Tochoji to express his hope that he could transmit his doctrine to the capital in the east. Twice burned in warfare and twice moved, Tochoji today is a handsome temple in Hakata's business district.

Kukai probably lived at Tochoji through the winter of 806-807. It is recorded that in the spring Dazaifu's Junior Assistant Governor General asked him to make a painting of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, a compassionate deity whose many hands signify boundless efforts to save lost souls. In the early summer he was directed to live at Kanzeonji.

Little else is known about the three years following his return to Hakata in 806. We do not know how long he stayed on Kyushu or what he did there. A man so drawn to solitary meditation in mountains must have climbed often to Homan's rocky sanctuaries to pray for deliverance in this time of trial.

Toward the end of that uncertain period he seems to have been at the temple near Naniwa where he had been ordained just before he left for China. In the latter half of 809 the court called him from that province to take up residence in a temple in the suburbs of the capital.

Bringing him into the orbit of the court was the answer to his memorial. The climate had changed. Heizei had retired after reigning only four years, relinquishing the throne to his brother, who became the Emperor Saga. As their father Kammu had been patron to Saicho and Tendai, Saga became patron to Kukai and his sect: Shingon, “True Words.” Saga was not only patron but friend, often demanding of Kukai’s time and energy but ensuring his rise to eminence.

They were in the same city now, Saicho and Kukai: two giants, not just in their time but for all time. Each in his own way, they naturalized Buddhism, shaping a Japanese religion that reached beyond the court to all the people. They were rivals, but relations between them were at first cordial. Saicho recognized that Kukai’s knowledge of Esoteric Buddhism was greater than his: he borrowed texts from Kukai, came to Kukai for training and initiation, and sent disciples to learn from Kukai. But relations cooled when some of Saicho’s disciples chose to stay with Kukai instead of returning to Saicho, when Kukai insisted that Shingon was superior to Tendai, and when Kukai’s influence eclipsed the older man’s.

Kukai’s great years began with his call to the capital. He was given a state temple in the heart of the city; like the city, it was still unfinished, but it was critical to the plan of the capital and it was his to complete as he wished. He founded the first school open to the poor as well as the rich, the lowly born as well as the aristocracy. He demonstrated a mastery of civil engineering when the governor of his home province on Shikoku begged the court to send him to rebuild a ruptured irrigation pond that government engineers had for three years struggled and failed to repair; in three months he supervised the construction of a great earthen dam that still, today, impounds one of the largest irrigation lakes in Japan, “The Pond of Ten Thousand Fields.” He asked for and was given Mount Koya, deep in the mountains of the Kii peninsula south of the capital, a place he had discovered in his wanderings as a young monk; there, far from the distractions of the capital, he built his great monastery, for he believed always that meditation should be practiced in high mountains, in deep forests.

Religious founder, philosopher, poet, artist, educator, engineer, intimate of the emperor, honored and revered, he performed his last services to the court and retired to Mount Koya in 835. At the age of sixty-one he died surrounded by disciples. Almost immediately he

moved into legend. Beloved all over the country as Kobo Daishi, his posthumous title, he was deified as master, savior, miracle worker.

The man who had once been Junior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu knelt before his painting of the Thousand-Armed Kannon and earnestly prayed.

CHAPTER SIX

The Ninth and Tenth Centuries

Principal Characters

Sugawara Michizane, whose spirit is worshiped as the Shinto deity

Tenman Tenjin

Fujiwara Motosune, regent and chancellor

Fujiwara Tokihira, Motosune's son, Minister of the Left

The Emperor Koko

The Emperor Uda, Koko's son

The Emperor Daigo, Uda's son

Prince Tokiyo, Daigo's younger half-brother

Tachibana Hiromi, court scholar

Fujiwara Sukeyo, court scholar

Miyoshi Kiyoyuki, court scholar

Misake Yasunori, priest of Dazaifu shrine

The twenty-second of September: eve of the autumnal equinox. Darkness has fallen but the shrine's compound is alive with light. The main hall glows, and, radiant in front of it, drawn up close, the ornate portable shrine, the *mikoshi*, waits on its stand.

Days and weeks of preparation have ended. Town elders met with priests to review their responsibilities. Those whose hereditary task it is, hauled in clean rice straw, stripped it, and wove it into heavy ropes, yards long, tapered at the ends but in the middle thicker than a stout man's arm; they coiled the new ropes and bore them to an altar in the hills for purification and dedication; finally they raised their ropes--sacred ropes now with zigzag strips of white paper hanging from them--high onto the stone torii gates: taboo against the entrance of evil.

Those priests who will officiate have undergone ascetic withdrawal from their families; sequestered at the shrine, they purified themselves for the rites to come.

The young men of the town who have been entrusted with the mission of carrying the mikoshi have themselves withdrawn from mundane life; quartered together at the shrine, they practiced with the heavy mikoshi, attached its dangling ornaments, formed a team; they cooked their own rice in the ritual way, over wood fires, and eaten the simplest of foods; they performed rites of purification.

All this and more has taken place. Now we are gathered. Some in the crowd come forward to pray.

To the mythic sounds of flutes and drums priests dressed all in white file into the sanctuary. Taking positions in two rows facing each other, they form a passage from the main altar to the mikoshi. The chief priest enters and stands between them. Facing the altar, he unrolls a scroll and intones his prayer. He praises the deity, begs him to manifest himself, to descend to the earth he once walked as a man so that his people may press close in worship.

The other priests, raising lengths of white cloth to screen the passageway from their eyes and ours, herald the deity with a soaring cry of wonder. We are plunged into darkness. The priests' paean swells to climax. The lights flash on. During the blackout the chief priest has ushered the deity from the altar of the sanctuary to the altar of the mikoshi. The Great Autumn Festival is under way.

Youths clad like attendants to the nobility come forward to receive their banners, emblems, staves, pikes, bows with quivers of arrows, and lanterns-- lanterns on tall poles, lanterns hung on frames, dozens of lanterns, all blazoning the shrine's plum blossom crest. The young men, trained and ready, shoulder the heavy poles of the palanquin bearing the mikoshi. The long procession forms as it moves out of the compound: the ninth century brought to life in costumes, equipage, and manners.

Lay persons like me follow at the rear, over the two drum bridges, through the gates, into the banner-lined street. There is no height that gives a view of the whole train: the files of priests, the files of attendants, the shrine maidens, the booming drums, the flutes; the chief priest on his horse; the deity's white horse with its empty saddle; the ox-drawn carriage like those that carried the nobility, this one with a small boy solemnly representing the deity; the hand- drawn carts bearing symbols and flags; the chattering, snapping lion's head stooping to children, who, if they are brave enough to put their heads into the gaping mouth, will be granted a healthy, lucky year. The bobbing lanterns stretch ahead.

Far across the rice fields and the trees and the new houses of those who commute to the city, a great fire is set to blazing on the mountain that legend says

the deity climbed; we can see its glow on the horizon. Kanzeonji's temple bell is rung in salute.

We move slowly, our pace set by the lumbering ox. Walking under the stars, I think how different is this procession from the festivals that I have seen at other shrines. They were boisterous, spurred by a deity on the loose, rampaging in the streets, tossing his mikoshi, stopping for drinks with favored families, savagely striking at houses out of favor.

Not this god. Our passage is sedate, dignified. We are enacting the decorum of the ancient court of which he was a member. Our deity is composed, refined.

He was not always so. He began violent and vengeful. It was his vengeful violence that made him a deity, a process we can trace, step by step. The story is compounded of fact and legend, difficult to separate, and we cannot always be certain which is which.

Our destination tonight is the site of a run-down cottage where the court noble Sugawara Michizane endured the last two years of his life. Under house arrest, branded a criminal, stripped of rank and position, exiled to Dazaifu, he suffered here, despondent and ill, until death took him in 903.

When a man from the capital died at Dazaifu his ashes were sent back to his home, but it is said that Michizane did not want this. To circumvent the regulations it may have been necessary to bury his body secretly. We are told that faithful servants placed his remains in an oxcart and started for the mountain graveyard. Just outside Dazaifu, close by a high ridge, within the precincts of a Buddhist temple, the ox lay down, refusing to go farther, and at that spot chosen by the ox, burial took place. This beguiling story has inspired the several handsome sculptures of a recumbent ox seen at the shrine today, and the presence of the ox tonight, but there are those who say it is only a legend. Whether or not an ox selected the gravesite, there is no doubt about the place: the main altar of the shrine rises directly above it.

Nothing especially remarkable so far, but at the capital six years later the man who had been Michizane's rival and who had contrived his banishment, who had then become prime minister and undisputed head of the government, Fujiwara Tokihira, died at the age of thirty-nine in the prime of his life.

Thirteen years later, in 923, the crown prince died at twenty-two. He was a nephew of Tokihira, whose sister had been married to the emperor shortly after Michizane was sent into exile.

Now it dawned on people that Michizane's malevolent spirit was at work. Stories circulated about the strange circumstances of Tokihira's death. A Buddhist priest had been summoned to his bedside to pray for his recovery. The monk's father also came, and he was the scholar who had hatched the plot against Michizane. Suddenly two green serpents emerged from Tokihira's ears, demanding that the father get his priestly son out of there. The frightening order was obeyed, the prayers ended, and Tokihira died. People understood that Buddhist exorcism had stymied Michizane's ghost until it appeared so fiendishly to the father with the guilty conscience.

Courtiers and commoners alike now knew that Michizane's embittered spirit was abroad. At the court spirit-pacifying ceremonies were conducted; Michizane's sons had already been called back from their exile and their careers rehabilitated; a quickly drafted imperial edict announced that in order to calm his spirit Michizane was posthumously pardoned, promoted in rank, and restored to the high office he had occupied. (Also, unfortunately, the emperor ordered that all records of the banishment be burned, making it impossible to know exactly how the plot was perpetrated.)

The troubles did not end. Two years later, in 925, the new crown prince died. He was Tokihira's grandson and he was only five.

In 930 a severe drought was broken by a terrible thunderstorm. Lightning struck the imperial palace, killing four courtiers, among them a man who had been involved in Michizane's exile. The emperor was so shocked that he sickened and died.

This calamity linked Michizane with the Thunder Demons. Since they were worshiped at Kitano, a shrine on the outskirts of the capital, Kitano became the focus of prayers to Michizane, and naturally, spontaneously, so did all of the many other Thunder Demon shrines from one end of Japan to the other. The new deity had acquired a nationwide spread of shrines.

Things had been happening at Dazaifu, too. One of Michizane's devoted attendants had erected a mausoleum over the grave, and there he performed Buddhist memorial services. After Tokihira's untimely death, his younger brothers found it wise to take precautions: they built a chapel to enclose the altar. Others, both from the capital and from Kyushu, added their contributions of money and land as endowment. The memorial to Michizane absorbed the old Buddhist temple and took its name, Anrakuji. The institution that is today a Shinto shrine existed for more than nine centuries as a Buddhist temple.

A Buddhist temple dedicated to a Shinto god might seem incongruous to outsiders, but those who built the temple saw no contradiction. The Japanese draw no hard line between their religions. Their deities mingle and merge; no clutter of dogma fences them off. The gods are venerated simply and directly. All prayers are valid.

In the capital, Tokihira's direct descendants continued to die off at ages alarmingly young (although his brothers' families flourished). There were more oracles, more revelations. One came to a Buddhist priest called Doken. Doken may have inherited a guilty conscience, for he was another son of that conspirator who at Tokihira's deathbed had been confronted by the two green serpents.

Doken reported to the court that after twenty-one days of prayer and fasting in a remote mountain cave he had been transported to heaven, where the Buddha introduced him to the deity who had been Michizane. When Doken informed him that in Japan he was honored as the Fire and Thunder Tenjin, Michizane protested, saying he was more important than that; the Thunder Demons were merely his messengers, and yes, he had dispatched them to strike the palace. He added that previously he had been so filled with anger that he had planned to destroy all Japan, but Buddhism had calmed his rage by one-tenth, so that now he intended to punish only those who had wronged him. Doken went on to visit hell, where he found the former emperor and his ministers writhing in torment for the evil they had committed against Michizane; the emperor begged Doken to have prayers said for his salvation.

Having heard Doken's report, the court intensified its services, while people in general rejoiced that Michizane had assured Doken that he would answer the prayers of those who worshiped him.

In the capital a year later, in 942, a poor woman named Ayako, who was a shaman and therefore accustomed to hearing divine utterances, received an oracle from Michizane: he wanted her to build a shrine for him at Kitano. Too impoverished to do that, Ayako could only put up a humble altar near her hut, but word of her oracle spread among the common people of the capital region. To them Michizane was a hero who had stood against government injustice. He had struck down their oppressors. He was a rebel against authority and he brought out the latent rebel in them. A singing, dancing crowd converged on Kitano and they built Ayako's shrine.

Theirs was simple, folk belief, but orthodox Shinto also heard from Michizane. In 947 another oracle was issued through Taro, the seven-year-old son of a Shinto priest. In it Michizane complained that he was not being worshiped as

impressively as were Hachiman and other major Shinto deities, and again he requested a shrine at Kitano. The boy's father hastened to Kitano, where, as vowed, a thousand pine trees sprang up to verify the oracle. The shrine was built, supplanting
the earthier one of Ayako's followers.

The court continued to be nervous. Disasters occurred just as they always had--the usual disasters: fires, floods, drought, pestilence--but now they raised racking questions. Had Michizane's spirit inflicted them? Had enough been done to mollify him?

He had been restored to the eminence he had achieved in life, but perhaps that was not enough. So they promoted him to the loftier post that his rival Tokihira had occupied. Finally, desperately, toward the end of the century, they gave him the highest rank that existed, Senior First Rank, and the highest office that existed, Grand Minister. They hoped he was satisfied. They had run out of earthly honors.

In the realm of the divine, he was already established as a deity, and an imposing one. The Thunder Demons were Tenjin, Heavenly Deities, and his association with them made him a Tenjin, too. (He bypassed the lesser category of Earthly Deities, though he had certainly been mortal.) His shrine at Kitano had been officially recognized and given elite status. The ultimate accolade came in 1004, when the emperor came to pay his respects with prayer.

By then a transformation was well under way. The Sugawara family had been given control of both Anrakuji at Dazaifu and Kitano at the capital. When Michizane's descendants took charge they set about to change the image of their ancestral deity. Fierce avenger gave way to a gentle god of scholarship, literature, and calligraphy, who answered prayers for scholarly advancement and excellence in the arts. Today it is a rare student who does not come to one of his shrines petitioning to get into the right school or university. Priests dislike talking about their deity's career of vengeance but they cannot erase it. Underlying the figure of the noble scholar is the antiestablishment militant with the power to right wrongs.

The figure we celebrate tonight as our procession moves toward the place where he spent his last unhappy years is sedate and gentle and dignified, all of these, but he has the force to erupt against injustice and to champion its victims. He has the majesty of righteousness.

*

The Sugawara family to whom Michizane was born in 845, shone in scholarship, not politics, but scholars were essential to government. Scholarship meant proficiency in Chinese, and Chinese was the language of government (as in Europe Latin was the official language of state and church through the Renaissance). Scholars were part of the same bureaucracy as politicians. In the hierarchy of the court they climbed the same ladder of rank.

The Sugawara were not an old family; they dated from Michizane's great- grandfather. The family had produced scholarly officials before him; for example, two family members serving under Otomo Tabito at Dazaifu in 733 were good enough poets to be invited to the plum blossom party (mastery of Chinese meant the ability to make an acceptable poem). But it was great- grandfather who made it possible for the family to rise to high rank. His character and his learning made him tutor to a crown prince who became a powerful emperor and who gave his old teacher a major promotion and willingly granted his petition to change his family's name from Haji to Sugawara. The change freed his descendants from the constraints tied to the old name, those of being a "service family" permanently locked in the lower ranks. One of the duties traditional with the family was providing funeral wares and services: a family legend said it was one of their ancestors who originated the haniwa clay figures, ending the live burial of a deceased bigwig's entourage.

The new Sugawara family that great-grandfather founded was not entitled to high rank by birth, as were noble families like the Otomo and the Fujiwara, but a Sugawara with ability and luck could climb into the higher ranks.

Michizane's grandfather did just that. His scholarship got him appointed to the 803 embassy to China, a dangerous honor but one that he survived. At the Chinese court he so distinguished himself that when he made it safely home he was granted fifth rank, the breakthrough that moved him from the minor to the major aristocracy. He went on to success as an educator and a scholar-poet, and he achieved the lofty third rank, putting him in the select company of only seven or eight men at any given time who rose that high; most of them of course were from noble families.

Few of grandfather's poems have survived. One that has is a cheerful comment on his own musicianship. "As a child I enjoyed music, and as an adult I appreciate it all the more.... Unfortunately I am completely unable to play any stringed instrument or produce a single note on the flute." But, he rejoiced in elegant Chinese, he could whistle.

Michizane's father also made it to third rank, and so from Michizane's earliest years there was pressure on him to succeed, all the more so because his elder brother died young, leaving him the only son. High rank would not come automatically: he had to seek it, as his father and grandfather had, through the examination system and
the university.

He was a precocious child but not a healthy one; probably he studied too hard. When he was still young he entered the Sugawara school, established by his grandfather to prepare students for the university entrance examination. Competition to get into the university was fierce; it was not unusual for men in their forties to be taking that examination. He passed it at eighteen. Five years later his father promoted him to graduate student; no doubt there was talk of favoritism.

The next hurdle was the civil service examination. Only the able and ambitious attempted it. Most students shied away: after a few years of study they took minor appointments and disappeared into the bureaucracy, never becoming important enough to be mentioned in the annals. Michizane aimed higher. He tackled the examination and at the unusually young age of twenty-six he passed it.

Early in the next year, 871, he received his first appointment as a junior official. His principal duty was to draft state papers, which had to be written in Chinese both precise and elegant. In addition to the documents he wrote in line of duty, he drew up many petitions for senior officials whose Chinese was not as assured as his. On occasion he wrote both such an appeal and then the imperial reply. Obliging powerfuI men did his career no harm; he became a personal friend of the most powerful of all, the regent Fujiwara Motosune. (As usual, the Fujiwara were firmly in control of the government.)

Michizane's reputation as a poet grew, too. He was sometimes called to the court to produce the kind of formal poetry required on ceremonial occasions. Such poems were not mere diversion; they were an essential part of the ritual that propelled government.

He advanced steadily. In 877, at thirty-three, he achieved one of his greatest ambitions: he was appointed professor of literature at the university. He was the third generation of his family to hold that post, something unprecedented. He had a right to be proud, and he was. His honors had come to him, he wrote, because of his talent and ability.

Then in 880, when his father died, he inherited control of the Sugawara school. There were other preparatory schools but the graduates of the Sugawara

school were the most successful in their later careers. While Michizane was its head it trained several hundred students, and they went on to dominate the university and to spread Michizane's influence throughout the bureaucracy.

Whichever school they attended, graduates remained fervently loyal to their teacher. Academic cliques generated spiteful feuds and rivalries. Michizane himself was certainly partisan. He was accused of favoritism, sometimes justly. He was quick to criticize but bitter when criticism was aimed at him. Because he considered few men his equal, he made few friends. He did, however, accumulate enemies.

Rivals accused him of writing an anonymous poem that slandered an important Fujiwara statesman. Michizane wrote that the blame fell on him because the poem was "technically superior." The incident could have wrecked his career but fortunately it blew over.

A year later he was indignant because critics had sneered at poems he had written in line of diplomatic duty, an exchange with the ambassador from Parhae.

It was forty-five years since the last Japanese mission to China, and relations with Korea were, as usual, strained. Japan's diplomatic activity was almost entirely restricted to Parhae, a country nearly forgotten today, but then in the flourishing middle of its two- hundred year history. It lay in southwestern Manchuria and the northeastern part of the Korean peninsula, and because it was as enthusiastically Sinophile as Japan, it was in Michizane's time Japan's chief conduit of Chinese culture. It was Parhae, for example, that brought China's latest, improved calendar, which the Japanese used to regulate their days until the sixteenth century.

Trade was important, too, briskly conducted under the pretense that it was "tribute." The Parhae delegations brought ginseng, honey, and furs, including tiger, bear, and leopard. The Japanese sent silks and brocades. That was the official trade. The Japanese court banned private trade between merchants, but it was certainly larger than the official trade.

Late in 882 a large Parhae embassy sailed across the Sea of Japan to a port on Japan's west coast far north of Hakata and Dazaifu. They spent the winter there, probably busy with illicit trade, and in the spring crossed the mountains to the capital on roads which, by government order, had been repaired and cleared of "corpses left by the roadside."

A hundred and forty-eight women dancers and 107 musicians had been rehearsing all winter to entertain them. An essential part of the protocol was the

exchange of poems, in Chinese, of course. It was official business in which each side was on its mettle, for it represented its country's culture.

Aware that the Parhae ambassador was a poet of note, the Japanese bolstered their delegation with their two finest poets, Michizane and his father-in-law, temporarily shifting them into diplomatic service with suitably high rank.

In the face of temptation to prepare poems in advance, Michizane persuaded his delegation to forgo ready-made verses: they would rely on the inspiration of the moment. "Each time we joined together to exchange poems," he wrote, "we loosened our belts and collars, and traded many cups of wine."

He also noted that, "Alas, writers always belittle each other." When it was over, the barbs came. He fumed that last year his enemies had charged him with that scurrilous anonymous poem because it was so well made; now they "grumble how crude my poems." He conceded that some were irregular, "but all were composed spontaneously" and at least one "was a work of rare genius. ... When a wise man speaks, the fools all take delight."

Despite such discords, those were years of fulfillment and satisfaction. Then that agreeable world fell apart. On the sixteenth day of the New Year of 886 the court announced its new appointments. Michizane was named governor of Sanuki Province.

For the next four years he would have to live in Sanuki and administer it.

He knew that as an official of the court he could be appointed to any position appropriate to his rank, but having established himself as a scholar it never occurred to him that he would be sent to the provinces to deal with the nitty-gritty of government. He was devastated.

It is difficult to comprehend the bleak sense of exile that mortified a courtier when he was sent to the provinces--and the provinces began at the borders of the capital. To a man of middle rank with no hope of going higher, provincial service meant a chance to accumulate a nest egg that would make life easier, but it was a sacrifice. Extended service in the provinces marked a man as ordinary; children raised in the provinces could never overcome the stigma of being rustic.

Michizane was not being banished but he felt that he was. His term in Sanuki loomed as drudgery with only clods for company, cut off from family and friends, scholars and poets, the business and brilliance of the court.

His friends tried to console him. Regent Fujiwara Motosune went out of his way to be kind, but Michizane left in tears. He went alone. He did not take a wife (he had more than one, for he fathered twenty-three children), and he would not scar a child's life by contamination with yokels.

He was lucky that his assignment was to flourishing Sanuki (today with almost identical borders it is Kagawa Prefecture). On the island of Shikoku, across a narrow island-studded channel of the Inland Sea, it was a few days' easy journey from the capital. It was not a large province, but it was so productive that its tax assessment was among the highest in the country.

Nor was it a cultural backwater. It had produced notable scholars, including the great Buddhist priest Kukai.

Kukai had died only fifty years earlier but already he had become a revered, almost mythical figure. His birthplace drew a steady stream of disciples, his family home had been turned into a temple, and around his name were clustering the legends that would transform him into a saviour, a miracle-worker, and a deity.

Michizane came without an aura of greatness, lonely and unsure of himself. He felt that he was unsuited for his job, and he was right. He lacked the necessary training and he lacked the temperament to deal with the practical affairs of government. He was told that his two immediate predecessors were remembered with respect and affection; that did not raise his confidence.

Describing his first tour of inspection, he wrote:

Opening the prison door I check that no one is unjustly held.
Lightly raising my reed whip, I gently chastise habitual wrongdoers

I try to teach the youths and lower classes to respect their elders and superiors.

His good intentions are evident, but throughout the poem runs the plaint of a man uneasy in unfamiliar territory: "I try to focus my vision [but] ... my talents are limited.... My thoughts are shallow."

If I govern poorly, my good name will be ruined.

How can I earn a good rating and advance in the world?

He had a staff of three or four from the capital but a governor had to depend on the local officials. He knew that, but it was hard for him to forge good relations with men he considered common.

They too had pride. They were the landed gentry, an aristocracy in their own right, families with a long history in their districts. They were possessive of their land and their peasants, and they could be intolerant of the courtiers who came like carpetbaggers from the capital.

It was the local gentry who actually governed the people and collected from them the taxes that supported every level of the ruling class, from village to province to the aristocracy and emperor of the court. All of the country's wealth was produced by the peasants. They were squeezed and squeezed again.

Michizane was right to "fear that the poor and weak will suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful," but he seemed helpless to do anything about it.

"I have tried to be honest and conscientious," he wrote, "but how bitter to be surrounded by corruption." Corruption was built into the system. Officials, both local and from the capital, were allotted shares of the province's taxes as part of their salary. It was a temptation, rarely resisted, to take more than was authorized, or to keep the good quality and remit the bad. Few governors did not go home gratifyingly richer after their term of office.

Michizane was one of several governors whose shipments of the silk which was part of their provinces' taxes drew sharp criticism from the capital: it was so thin it was "Just like a spider's web in autumn" or so coarse it appeared to be "woven from fibers of weeds." Each negligent governor was sent a bolt of properly woven silk from the government warehouse in case he had forgotten what good silk was like.

Michizane recorded few triumphs as governor. One came early. When he first arrived at Sanuki's capital he was pleased to find a lotus pond nearby. Flowers were abundant that year and the next. "I addressed my fellow officials and had them compose poems in praise of the blossoms," and because the lotus is a sacred flower in Buddhism (deities are often pictured seated on a lotus), "From among the countless plants in the pond, I plucked enough to distribute to the twenty-eight temples in Sanuki." He hoped that this would help the people "gain salvation" and he reported that it did indeed inspire joy and piety, as well as impressing his fellow officials, who "praised me as their leader."

The greatest disaster that he faced was a drought that came late in his tour. In 888 the lotus pond and most of Sanuki's irrigation ponds dried up. Prayers went up from both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples:

The shrine priests are exhausted from running about distributing offerings.

The monks in meditation weary of sitting and reciting sutras.

Finally Michizane took matters into his own hands. He climbed the height called Fortress Mountain to Sanuki's preeminent Shinto shrine and addressed a no- nonsense prayer to the deities: "The Governor of Sanuki, Senior Fifth Rank Lower, Lord Sugawara, reverently prays to the gods of Fortress Mountain with offerings of wine, fruit, incense, and cloth."

In case those bribes did not soften the gods' hearts, he reminded them that generosity has its limits. "Sanuki contains eighty-eighty villages with two hundred thousand inhabitants." If rains come, "if not one village experiences calamity and not one mouth voices complaint, then the holy offerings of food, cloth, and jewels will be pure and plentiful.... But if the benevolent rains are few ... the people will be filled with anger. Both gods and men will suffer. The rites of worship will fall into disuse. As gods, you may judge this. Do not begrudge your divine assistance. I beg you to accept this prayer." The blend of blandishment and blackmail worked. It rained.

The court permitted Michizane to spend the second winter of his term at home and so he was able to attend the enthronement of a new emperor, one who would have a profound effect on his life.

The previous emperor, who had reigned under the name of Koko, was an anomaly; he had come to the throne at fifty-five in a period when child emperors were the norm. The Fujiwara chancellor would select a young imperial prince born to a Fujiwara mother, put him on the throne, and then rule for the boy as regent.

Fujiwara Motosune had done that ten years earlier, but his choice had turned out to be psychotic with homicidal tendencies; it had been necessary to retire him at the age of sixteen, and before Motosune picked another child he wanted a little time to assess the candidates. He resorted to Koko, an imperial prince not in line for the throne, who was to serve for a few years as a stopgap, with the clear understanding that none of his sons was to succeed him.

When Koko fell ill three years later, Motosune was ready with the child of his choice. However, the dying emperor had a change of

heart. Adroitly outmaneuvering Motosune, he managed to make his own twenty-one- year-old seventh son the crown prince. This was unsettling but Motosune had to accept it; he took what comfort he could from hearing Koko bid his son to rely on Motosune's counsel.

Dutifully--and because he had no choice--the new emperor, who took the name of Uda, directed an eminent scholar named Hiromi to write an edict confirming Motosune's powers as chancellor. Etiquette demanded that Motosune decline the first invitation. In drafting the second edict Hiromi for some reason changed the term for "chancellor" to the word *ako*.

Motosune had served Koko as ako without objection but now a scholar named Sukeyo informed him that in ancient China the title of 'ako' was honorary, conveying neither duties nor power.

Fujiwara Motosune had no interest in empty titles and, moreover, he suspected Uda's motives. His father Koko had demonstrated that he wanted to reassert imperial authority by loosening the Fujiwara grip on power; the son seemed to have similar ideas. He had not had the benefit of a Fujiwara mother and upbringing in a Fujiwara household; apparently he needed a lesson in government. Motosune turned the academic squabble into a contest of wills. He sent word that since the title of 'ako' conferred no duties, he would perform none, although if Uda wanted him as chancellor he would gladly serve as he had before. Then he retired to his mansion. As long as he stayed at home, no other important official dared offend him by reporting for duty. Government halted.

In this dilemma Uda called for a scholarly debate between Hiromi and Sukeyo. It was no help. He wrote in his diary that both their arguments seemed reasonable. "But the day was hot, and my heart was filled with anxiety. Thus I could come to no decision. All affairs of government, great and small, have stagnated. All the provinces and all the ministries complain ceaselessly."

The emperor was so distraught that he became impotent, compounding his anxiety. His physicians were able to cure that but the political crisis continued. Four months passed. Uda announced that the word 'ako' had been used contrary to his wishes. That was not enough. Four more months went by before he caved in. In the late autumn he accepted one of Motosune's daughters as his consort, so that a Fujiwara heir could be hoped for, and legal experts were summoned to determine Hiromi's punishment for his "misdeed" (he was pardoned almost before he was

sentenced). Motosune was satisfied. He took up his duties and the court began to function again.

Because the ‘ako incident’ occurred while Michizane was governor of Sanuki, he was not directly involved, but he had been in the capital when it began and he followed it intently after he returned to Sanuki**.** Both scholars had been students of his father, both were friends of his, and Sukeyo had married one of his daughters. He wrote in a poem that “ugly disputes ... make me glad I am not ... at court,” but when Hiromi wrote asking for support because all the court scholars had turned against him, Michizane responded with a blunt letter to his friend and benefactor Motosune. He defended Hiromi, pointing out (as apparently no one else had) that although in ancient China ‘ako’ was indeed an honorary title, in later times it meant ‘chancellor.’ He made it clear that he thought Motosune was not being the “model of behavior” he was “supposed to be.”

It is not known whether this letter helped to settle the dispute; Motosune may have received it after the affair was resolved. But it had a decided effect on Michizane’s career: it strained his relations with the Fujiwara and it brought him to Uda’s attention as a man who dared to stand up to the Fujiwara.

A retiring governor was supposed to remain at his post until the records of his administration were inspected and approved. Michizane couldn’t wait: he headed for home as soon as his term was up. The required audit was slowed because he was not on hand; it took a full year, a year in which he was not eligible for a new appointment because he hadn’t been cleared from the old.

But he was home, and again he was being called to the palace to offer poems. Uda had literary tastes, and during the year a warm relationship developed between the forty-seven-year-old scholar and the twenty-four-year-old emperor. Beyond that, because Michizane had the administrative experience of governing a province, he appeared to be a likely ally in Uda’s push to restore power to the throne.

Early in 891 Michizane received a new appointment. Fujiwara Motosune had died a month earlier and his son Tokihira was only twenty-one, too young to exert the power he was heir to. Uda seized the chance to appoint his own men to key positions. He made Michizane the head of the office that assisted the emperor in affairs of state. With this appointment Michizane crossed the line from scholarship to politics, the first of his family to find himself on the track to political power.

He was almost derailed three years later. In 894 he was appointed ambassador to China. Had he made the journey he would have been absent for a year or more and, considering the dangers, he might never have returned; but the mission was never sent.

There are those who see his appointment as a Fujiwara plot to get rid of him, but the embassy was probably Uda's idea, part of his effort to revive tradition. I had been more than fifty years since the last mission to China, and certainly Michizane was the logical choice as ambassador: he was the country's leading Chinese scholar; he had diplomatic experience in receiving missions from Parhae; and his grandfather in 804-805 and an uncle in 838-839 had served in the two most recent embassies to China.

It is clear that Michizane considered his appointment an honor-he continued to use the title of ambassador for more than three years but he had no desire to make the journey. He took the lead in urging that it be postponed and then cancelled.

He offered a bundle of reasons. To build and outfit four ships and assemble the required gifts would have been a huge expense, and the court was pinched financially. The T'ang dynasty that had ruled China for almost three centuries was crumbling; China was torn by strife and rebellion; there was reason to doubt that the Japanese would be properly received or even safe. The voyage would have been even more dangerous than usual because Korean pirates were harassing the sea routes. In earlier times the missions had satisfied the court's desire for cultural advances and exotic goods; now those needs were met by the missions from Parhae, by Chinese merchants, and by the private travel of Buddhist monks.

Underlying all this was a growing sense of independence: the Japanese were feeling more self-assured about their culture; they no longer felt a need for Chinese tutelage. It would be nearly four centuries before Japan sent another official embassy to China.

That issue disposed of, Michizane continued his rise to power. The emperor pitted him against the ranking Fujiwara, Motosune's son Tokihira. Since Tokihira was who he was, he started with higher court rank, but Michizane's promotions came faster. Rank does not tell the whole story: through most of the decade from 891 to 701, Michizane's duties were distinctly more important. He wielded more influence; he was Uda's confidant, his most trusted adviser.

The daughter that Motosune had placed in the emperor's household as part of his price for settling the 'ako' affair became pregnant, but Motosune's dying

prayers that the child be a boy were not answered. The baby was a girl and females were no longer in the running for the throne. (After the sour experience with Koken/Shotoku there was not another empress for more than eight centuries.) So Uda was able to pick his own heir and Michizane helped him choose. Since they could not incense the Fujiwara, they regretfully passed over Uda's favorite son in favor of one with a Fujiwara mother. Michizane then took a hand in educating the boy with poems meant to elevate his taste and build his character.

Once he had things arranged to his satisfaction, Uda wanted to retire. Apparently he believed that he could control the government and his young son from retirement, as some emperors had done in the past. Michizane persuaded him to wait a couple of years, but in 897, on the same day that the court celebrated the coming of age of the thirteen-year-old crown prince, Uda made his announcement, proclaiming that "until the young emperor has matured" the affairs of government should be conducted by Tokihira and Michizane. His testament to his son included obligatory praise of Tokihira but a glowing assessment of Michizane: I have taken him as my mentor," he wrote, and he urged his son to do the same.

On this same day that the young Emperor Daigo was enthroned both Tokihira and Michizane were promoted to senior third rank. Six years of rapid advancement had brought Michizane even with the head of the Fujiwara. Until then their relationship had been cordial; now there was strain.

The difference in their ages sharpened the difference in their temperaments. Michizane was a scholarly conservative who held to precedent. Tokihira was practical and energetic; he saw the need to curb extravagance and make sweeping reforms in finance and administration, moves that to Michizane must have been radical and ill conceived.

The tension between them was aggravated because Tokihira was being frustrated in his attempts to make one of his younger sisters the new emperor's consort. His first try was blocked by Uda's mother, who arranged that her own daughter be chosen (thus marrying Daigo to his aunt). When that young woman died in childbirth, it was believed by many, including her mother, that her life had been taken by the malevolent spirit of Tokihira's rejected sister (the spirits of living persons, as well as those of the dead, could roam abroad to take revenge). That was more than enough reason for the mother to again block Tokihira's imperial matchmaking.

Meanwhile, Michizane's daughters were doing very well. One had become a favorite consort of Uda (in his testament to his son, Uda urged him to be guided by this lady in matters relating to the women's quarters, always a hotbed of jealousy

and intrigue). Another daughter was principal handmaid, the highest woman official at the court. And a third was married to Uda's younger son, Daigo's half brother, as soon as he came of age.

All court families sent daughters to the court to attend the emperor. The Sugawara family had done so before. The children born of those daughters had no political significance because then the Sugawara family had no political significance. Michizane's daughters did have political significance, and marriage politics was a game the Fujiwara could not afford to lose.

Michizane tried to assure Tokihira that he was not a rival: "Blessed by our ruler's limitless beneficence, I know contentment. Why should I thirst with ambition?" But in everyone's eyes he was a rival: Uda had placed him in that position. And to most of the court he was an interloper: his scholarship did not entitle him to political power. In his rise he had passed many men who were bitterly envious.

Early in 899, about a year and a half after retiring, Uda arranged that Tokihira and Michizane be appointed to the two highest positions in the government (the position of Grand Minister was honorary and often was not filled): Tokihira as Minister of the Left, Michizane as the slightly lower-ranked Minister of the Right.

Michizane tried hard to decline: "Humbly I must state that I am not of noble birth; my family is one of scholars. Through the generosity of the retired emperor, I attained the rank of high court noble, but as a result of today's promotion I can neither sleep nor eat because of my apprehension. People's hearts are not filled with tolerance. Demons gaze with envy and bring misfortune to those who prosper. I beg his majesty to consider my position and permit me to decline this office."

He was in danger and he knew it. Three times he tried to decline. Uda would not hear of it; he thought he could protect his man. Michizane was not so confident.

His worries deepened when a scholarly sin that he had committed nine years earlier came back to haunt him. He had been appointed to administer the civil service examination to a student named Kiyoyuki. As custom required in order to prevent favoritism, Kiyoyuki was from a rival faction. He was thirty- eight years old. Although he had made slow progress through the university, his teacher wrote that his "talent surpasses that of his contemporaries." (Gossip said that when Michizane read that he crossed out "talent" and inserted "ignorance.") Michizane failed Kiyoyuki and there is little doubt that he was being unfair, because his decision was reversed. Although Kiyoyuki went on to become professor of

literature and president of the university, he advanced slowly, dogged by Michizane's slur, and he never shed his bitterness.

Now he sent Michizane a letter that purported to be a friendly warning: "When a student at the university I secretly immersed myself in the occult sciences. Since ancient times, diviners have investigated the occasions when ... retainers overthrow their lords.

Determining the years of such momentous events is as easy as pointing to the palm of one's hand."

Michizane may not have been versed in the art of divination, but like almost everyone else of his time he believed in it, and Kiyoyuki was citing the latest, most up-to- date methods from China.

"Next year will be indicated by the conjunction of signs ... foretelling a change in the mandate of heaven"--in other words, a rupture in the imperial lineage. "The second month will be particularly inauspicious."

Then he bore in on Michizane. "It is my humble observation that you have risen above your status as a scholar and surpassed others to become a great minister"--a career so spectacular, he declared, that it outshone all but that of Kibi Makibi, the only other scholar who had risen to be Minister of the Right. "It is my hope that you will know contentment" --Michizane had used the same euphemism for renouncing ambition- -"and recognize your proper status. You ought to return to the mountains and devote yourself to the beauties of the clouds and mist."

Kiyoyuki soon took his ominous predictions to the court. Confidentially he divulged to Tokihira and a few others what he said the stars had revealed: that Michizane was plotting to overthrow Daigo and put his younger brother Prince Tokiyo on the throne. Since Tokiyo was married to Michizane's daughter, Michizane would be dominant as the emperor's father-in-law and grandfather of a future emperor. Somehow all the whispering was kept secret; neither Uda nor Michizane learned of it.

The new year of 901 began auspiciously. On the seventh day Tokihira and Michizane were both raised to second rank, an honor awarded only to men of great distinction.

Twenty-two days later, on the twenty-fifth of the month, the plot was sprung. An imperial edict stripped Michizane of all rank and honor, labeled him a traitor, banished him to Dazaifu.

Caught by surprise, Uda rushed to the palace to protest. The conspirators had anticipated that: he was blocked from entering. He unrolled a mat and sat in front of the closed gate until nightfall.

On the thirtieth Uda again went to the palace and again was refused entrance. He kept vigil at the gate all night. With the morning, the first day of the second month, he gave up and returned to his residence. A few blocks away, armed guards surrounded Michizane as he began his journey into exile.

Tears were shed. His family had been scattered: his four grown sons stripped of their positions at the court and banished to distant provinces, widely separated from each other and from their father; his wives and daughters held in the capital; Prince Tokiyo forced to become a monk.

We do not know how many were permitted to accompany Michizane: a few attendants. It was a small and woeful party that the guards herded out of the capital.

On that first day they reached Yamazaki, where travelers boarded boats to go down the Yodo River to the Inland Sea. At Yamazaki, Michizane was permitted to visit an elderly aunt who had retired to a nearby Buddhist nunnery. They talked all night, until morning brought another tearful parting.

It is generally thought that from Yamazaki his journey was by boat, down the river and then along the coast of the Inland Sea, moving by day, tying up and spending each night ashore, as was usual for the travel of officials in no hurry.

It must have taken more than one day to row down the meandering river, and so, on the bank of the Yodo, Michizane got his first taste of the indignities that lay ahead. The orders carried by the guards brought them all the hospitality the local people were capable of; the same orders directed that Michizane was to be treated as a criminal: he was to be given no food or assistance, not even spoken to. Those with him had to forage for all they got.

Long ago the government had established stations for water travel all along the coast. Just as the post stations that dotted the highways provided food, inns, palanquin bearers, and fresh horses (to those entitled to ride), the water stations supplied accommodations and boats for the next leg of the trip.

The small boats hugged the coast as they were rowed from haven to haven. (They had a sail but it was useless unless the wind was behind them.) Boatmen

were cautious, loath to risk their boats or themselves. High waves, strong winds, or rain could keep them in harbor for days on end; if an ominous cloud came up while they were under way, they would scurry for the nearest anchorage. Michizane asserted that once he was put on “a boat with a damaged stern.”

The winter days were short and so was each day’s progress; the weather was cold, uncertain, and often unpleasant. Michizane wrote that “on the route were over fifty way stations”; if that was an exaggeration, the journey must nevertheless have taken more than a month.

Michizane was not well when he started; grief and shock worsened his health. Afloat or ashore he was uncomfortable. His poems indicate that at only two stops was he treated with civility: at Akashi, a week or so into his journey, where the station master braved official wrath by showing sympathy, and at Hofu, much closer to his destination, where a distant branch of his family, still bearing the old name of Haji, were the local power, and were too independent and too far from the capital to care much about its commandments.

At last they reached Hakata and moored for the last time. Although Dazaifu had long since been told that he was coming, his house was not ready. He was kept at a shabby inn for two nights. “Curious spectators” peered “through the small gate.”

I was nauseated and my chest ached. I was exhausted and my feet were weak.... Gloomy despair tortured me.

Moved into “a deserted official residence” at the scrubby edge of the city, he found the rafters decayed, the well clogged, the narrow garden choked with weeds, the fence broken. He made some repairs and tried to resign himself to the loneliness of house arrest.

His health grew worse. He could not eat:

Farm children brought me vegetables,

And my kitchen helper made me a thin gruel. I wasted away...

No longer called upon to celebrate official occasions, he wrote poems that were personal, autobiographical, and eloquent. He remembered past glories, scourged his slanderers at the court, lamented his “too severe” treatment. He found solace in the poetry of Chinese sages who had suffered as he was suffering.

Religion took on new meaning: I clasped my hands in prayer and took refuge in the Buddha, and turned my heart to the practice of meditation."

He never lost all hope that he would be reprieved and called back to the capital. But "Letters from home ceased to arrive," and fate seemed to be closing in. "Surely here I will meet my end.... My bones will be buried in exile."

He died in 903, on the twenty-fifth day of the second month.

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When I arrived at the shrine and announced that I wanted to spend a year in study there, the chief priest turned me over to an affable priest named Misake, head of the shrine's cultural research office. Misake soon became a good friend. He found an apartment for me, very near the shrine, and encouraged his staff to help me.

In later conversation Misake told me that his ancestor had been a student of Michizane's, that he had accompanied Michizane into exile, served him in his last years, buried his body, erected the mausoleum over his grave, and tended it for the rest of his life. "It was my ancestor, Misake Yasuyuki, who founded this institution."

That came of the long relationship between Yasuyuki's family and Michizane's, Misake said, dating back to the times when the Sugawara bore their old name, Haji; perhaps the name Misake indicated that they had once brewed saké. I remembered the Haji family's traditional responsibility for funeral services; that would have included providing ceremonial wine. Listening to Misake, the continuities of Japanese history became very real.

I was still getting settled in my apartment when one morning the two attractive young women in the office told me that an important service would be held that evening, not at the shrine but at a place they called Tofuro. They offered to guide me.

It was my first visit to the site of Dazaifu, that Distant Capital born out of emergency thirteen centuries earlier. Walking among the old foundation stones in the darkness, I could not make out the grand design but under the open sky I felt the majesty of the setting. At the far end of the expanse an altar had been set up, flanked by fires in standing braziers. The flames picked the scene out of the night: the altar, the gathering of white-robed priests.

After the opening rite of purification and the chief priest's prayer at the altar, musicians in the costume of the ancient court moved to the low platform set before the altar and took up their instruments to entertain the god and accompany the dancers. To plaintive flute, staccato drum, and words so old their meaning has been lost, a young boy offered a dance out of ancient ritual. Solemnly he traced the directions, forward and back, sometimes taking up a fan, sometimes a serpentine clacker. He yielded to the radiance of shrine maidens in bright flowing robes; surely they too pleased the spirit at the altar.

A group of townsfolk, men and women, came to the stage with koto, flute, and drum. From them rose a song of haunting loveliness. Another group, and our aureole of light was filled with a second song as moving as the first. Someone whispered that the works of both songs were poems composed by the deity during his earthly life.

At home I looked up those poems. The first marked one of his last court appearances as poet. The ninth day of the ninth month brought the annual Chrysanthemum Festival, celebrated at the palace with a gathering of poets to compose on a theme chosen by the emperor. In the year 900 the festival poems so pleased the young
emperor that he called the poets back for more the next day, this time on the subject of "autumn thoughts." Michizane, then fifty-six, offered this poem to the sixteen-year-old Daigo:

Over the years, your minister has experienced joys,
But tonight everything seems to stir only sadness:
The cold voice of the cricket in the blowing wind;
The falling leaves of the Chinese Paulownia, struck by the rain.
You are at your peak; I am growing old.
Your generosity is boundless; my repayment is slow.
How can I relieve such feelings?
I drink wine, listen to the koto, and recite poems.

The young emperor was so moved by this poem that he gave Michizane a robe.

One year later, in dismal exile, Michizane took out that robe, wept, and wrote what is today his most loved and remembered poem. Set to music, it was the second song:

Ninth Month, Tenth Day
This night last year, attending at the Seiryo Palace,
I spoke my sorrow in a "Poem on Autumn Thoughts."
The robe His Majesty bestowed on me, here with me now--

Each day I lift it reverently, bow to its lingering fragrance.

The autumn moon rose, the stars were joined by the lights of aircraft taking off from Fukuoka airport. Their swift course across the sky, the hum of their engines, did not seem anachronistic. They reinforced the timelessness I felt at the site of the Distant Capital on that crisp autumn evening.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The years 824 through 941

Principal Characters
Chang Pogo, Korean merchant prince
Yi Chung, lieutenant to Chang Pogo
Fujiwara Sumitomo, courtier turned pirate
Taira Masakado, warrior become rebel
Misake Yasuyaki, priest of Michizane's memorial

In the 170 years or so from Tabito's time to Michizane's, Dazaifu became a very different place. Tabito was charged with keeping a lid on Kyushu and receiving foreign diplomats (though none appeared to enliven his stay). By Michizane's era Kyushu was relatively docile and foreign relations had diminished to the exchanges with Parhae, whose delegations almost never came to Dazaifu, although the court repeatedly asked them to. Dazaifu's business was no longer diplomacy, it was trade. The handsome reception center on Hakata's shore housed merchants, storehouses bulged with imported goods, and Dazaifu's officials grew wealthy, sometimes legally, sometimes not. It had begun in 824, when a Korean named Chang Pogo appeared at Hakata.

No one has been able to trace Chang Pogo's ancestry. He was still a youth when he left Silla Korea, went to China, and became a mercenary. (Military service was not popular with the Chinese; they could always use a few good men.) A skilled, tough, warrior, he was soon an officer in the Chinese forces stationed along the southern coast of the Shantung peninsula, just across the Yellow Sea from Korea.

Each of the ports along this coast had its large and prosperous colony of Koreans. Self-governing because the Chinese didn't like to bother with foreigners, they provided complete service to Korean shippers: they were agents and brokers and the monks in their Korean Buddhist temples prayed for the safety of ships and sailors.

Using his position and the cumshaw that flowed his way, Chang Pogo acquired his own fleet and soon dominated those ports. He returned to Korea a wealthy man. He was also an angry man. He was incensed that pirates were kidnaping Korean peasants and selling them as slaves in China, crimes that the Silla government seemed helpless to prevent. He established his headquarters on an island called Wando, off the southwest tip of Korea and astride the route from China to Silla's capital; then he petitioned the Silla king to grant him the means to

wipe out the slave trade. He was given a force of ten thousand men; he made them into his personal army. He quickly eliminated the slavers and, as the new master of the Yellow Sea, took almost total control of the China-Korea trade.

He had looked ahead. Wando island was ideally situated for traffic to Japan; he turned his attention in that direction. He could not expect a warm welcome. Dazaifu had been confronted by a disquieting number of Koreans in recent years. Silla rule was disintegrating in dynastic turbulence and, as disorder erupted, sizable groups of immigrants crossed to Kyushu looking for a quieter place to live.

Other arrivals were less peaceable. Korean pirates attacked Tsushima in 811, and two years later struck at the Ojima islands off Kyushu's west coast; more than a hundred inhabitants were killed or wounded, but all of the pirates were killed or captured. The court sent additional troops and Dazaifu was ordered to resume instruction in the use of the longbow.

In these circumstances Chang Pogo had to be both daring and persuasive. Dazaifu officials would not see him but he was allowed to meet with the governor of Chikuzen, whose province included the port of Hakata. The talks must have gone well. Shortly thereafter one of Chang Pogo's merchants sailed into the harbor.

It had been a long time since Hakata had seen so rich a cargo. Dazaifu officials pondered how to take advantage of it, given the government's deep- seated aversion to private trade; if reluctantly permitted it must be in an official market with controlled prices. A step in that direction would be to put the goods in a government building and, since there was little chance of a diplomat's showing up, the Koreans and their wares were housed in the elaborate reception area near the port.

Word was sped to the capital. The emperor, the council of state, and their friends happily shopped from the list of goods and sent back their orders. The trouble was that Hakata had seen such a frenzy of buying that the choice items were gone. Dazaifu officials had made a gesture toward control but had themselves bought feverishly. In a lame explanation to the court they found it convenient to blame their favorite scapegoats, the wealthy local gentry, who, they wrote, had squandered their fortunes in wild buying.

The court did not accept that. "This results from a failure to make arrests," the council replied, placing the blame squarely on Dazaifu; henceforth, "when merchants arrive, their freight is to be examined from top to bottom, and everything of use to the court shall be sent up by mounted messenger." Having

preempted the best, the council permitted the rest to be sold “under the supervision of Dazaifu officials.”

Trade flourished for several years. In 840 a grateful Chang Pogo sent his lieutenant Yi Chung with a gift of saddles for the court. This, the council decided, was going too far. Only foreign rulers could present “tribute”; it was presumptuous of the mere subject of a foreign land to try to do so. Dazaifu was instructed to return the saddles, “courteously,” and to send Yi Chung home, but not until he had sold his goods (the saddles must have brought premium prices).

When Yi Chung sailed from Hakata his cargo included silk consigned in a private deal of the forbidden kind that was making some officials on Kyushu rich. The governor of Chikuzen was sending silk pongee which Yi Chung was to trade for Chinese goods that would bring the governor a

handsome profit.

When Yi Chung reached Wando he found that Chang Pogo had been murdered. His power and wealth had made him a player in the factional turmoil that raised up and brought down Silla kings in fast time, but he had overreached. In 839 his forces stormed the capital and put his candidate on the throne. Being obligated, the new king agreed to marry Chang Pogo’s daughter, but he did not live long enough to go through with the wedding. Still wanting his daughter to live royally, Chang Pogo tried to get the deceased king’s son and successor to fulfill the promise, but this time the nobility refused to marry their king to a merchant’s daughter and, to settle the argument, sent an assassin who terminated Chang Pogo.

Fearful that the same fate awaited him, Yi Ching dashed back to the safety of Hakata. Cohorts of the assassin soon showed up to accuse Yi Chung of rebellion and demand that he be turned over to them. The

Japanese smelled treachery, sent the pursuers on their way, and assured Yi Chung that he could tarry in Hakata as long as he wished, since forcing him back to Korea would be like “casting a wild beast to a starving tiger.”

Meanwhile, Chikuzen’s governor, indignant that his pongee had not been sold for the profit he expected, had seized all of Yi Chung’s cargo as reparation. When the council heard of this, they rapped the governor’s knuckles and ordered Dazaifu to return Yi Chung’s merchandise to him. It was not, they said, “the Way of the Ruler” to deprive a merchant of his goods. But the whole chain of events had roused the old bias against Koreans; any further Korean immigration was banned and Korean merchants were denied the use of the reception center.

It really didn’t matter. Korean merchants no longer appeared, for Chang Pogo’s death ended his trade empire. It also ended his suppression of piracy. As the Silla dynasty lurched toward extinction, Korean pirates became bolder and meaner. In the summer of 869, as Dazaifu was preparing to dispatch a convoy of tax goods to the capital, two Korean pirate ships sailed brazenly into Hakata bay, picked off a boat whose crew had foolishly decided to set out ahead of the others, and plundered the entire annual shipment of silk and silk floss from Buzen province. It was a serious loss and a humiliation. Dazaifu was berated for letting it happen.

There was a quiet interval, but 893, 894, and 895 brought a series of bloody, damaging attacks that surely influenced the court’s decision to abandon the embassy to China that Michizane was to have led in 894; the seas were dangerous. After each attack the court sent another detachment of soldiers to Dazaifu, but there was no way of knowing where pirates would hit, and Japan could not go to sea against them. Its ships were slow and clumsy compared with the Koreans’ and it had no commander like Chang Pogo to lead the fight.

The disappearance of Korean traders had not ended foreign trade. Almost as if on cue, Chinese merchants sailed into Hakata bay. The court regarded the Chinese as a distinct improvement over Koreans. In the Japanese vocabulary, the Chinese were “equals,” the Koreans were lt vassals.” Furthermore the Chinese brought more of the Chinese goods that the Japanese coveted: medicines, fabrics,

books, toiletries (such as lipstick), jewelry (such as combs and hairpins), and, most desirable of all, celadon pottery with its lustrous, translucent green glaze. Gray green or willow green or sea green, the Japanese craved it (as did peoples as far away as Morocco). Once it had gone only to the privileged; now anyone of means could eat from it.

For the Chinese, Hakata's reception center was reopened; they were given free lodging for as long as they stayed. And their stay was long, because the court chose to deal with them directly. To make certain that the government and the nobility of the capital got first choice, Dazaifu was cut out of the picture. When a ship arrived, officials were dispatched from the capital to examine the cargo and carry back all that they chose. Payment was then sent back to Hakata.

This took at least a couple of months, and although the choicest items may have been skimmed, there was plenty left and plenty of time for trading in Hakata. Deals were struck openly and furtively. Dazaifu and Chikuzen officials, in their position as hosts, had opportunities to apply the art of the squeeze, which came as no shock to the Chinese. Long experience had taught them to figure in such miscellaneous expenses when they set their prices, and the unexpected boon of free room and board gave them an extra margin of profit. Storehouses at Dazaifu and elsewhere on Kyushu filled with goods both licit and illicit, and everybody knew tales about the wealth carried back to the capital by returning officials. (We may note that Dazaifu's warehouses held quantities of prized Chinese medicines when Michizane was a prisoner, but although he was ill none was offered to him; his wife had to send medicines to him from the capital.)

Despite the profits, it became increasingly clear that foreign trade had drawbacks. For one thing, the foreigners in their midst gave disgruntled Japanese new horizons for their scheming. In 866 Dazaifu discovered that a senior official in Hizen province, one of the local gentry, was plotting to cross over to Silla, enlist a band of Koreans, and lead them in taking Tsushima. Four years later a tip from Silla uncovered treason at Dazaifu itself: the Junior Assistant Governor General--a Fujiwara occupying the same position that Fujiwara Hirotsugu had--and some other key officials
had been conspiring with the king of Silla.

The flow of Chinese imports became a problem in itself. The treasury ran out of gold to pay for the government's purchases, and was reduced to paying in silk from Dazaifu's warehouses. The council of state tried to cut back by ordering the Chinese to come less often. The Chinese paid no attention, and whenever they appeared, the same men who had ordered the cutback rushed to buy.

This was made clear in a caustic directive issued by Michizane's former rival, Fujiwara Tokihira, just five months after Michizane's death. When a Chinese ship arrived, he wrote sternly, the men sent by the government were no longer getting first choice. Not only were Kyushu's gentry, who "love exotic items," driving up prices, but, "In recent years, members of the imperial family and the nobility send messengers to bid before the authorities can get there."

The culprits seem obvious. They certainly included Tokihira's own family, if not himself. But he censured Dazaifu for letting unauthorized persons get to the port. He did not explain how Dazaifu was to stop representatives of the emperor and the country's highest nobility. "Let another order be sent," he decreed. "There will be no leniency."

Tokihira's harangue was merely foolish, but it highlighted a peril. By putting self-interest first, the nobility were undermining the government they ran.

The shortage of gold was a symptom: the government was starved for revenue. The biggest reason was the swift growth of huge, private, tax-exempt estates in the hands of noble families, Buddhist temples, and Shinto shrines. It had begun innocently. To increase farmland, the government offered entrepreneurs lifetime tax-exemption on reclaimed land. "Lifetime" stretched until it became perpetual. Great families and religious institutions contrived to make not just their reclaimed tracts but all of their lands tax-exempt. As the central government's control of the provinces weakened and lawlessness grew, small landholders found it wise to commend their lands to the estate holders: the estates asked less in dues than the government had in taxes, and the estates' fighting men gave protection that the government could not. Great manors mushroomed all across the country. Their noble and religious owners grew rich while the loss of taxes crippled the government.

Even the little mausoleum at Michizane's grave acquired land. The offerings of prudent courtiers assigned to Dazaifu were creating a budding temple. Then in 919, ten years after Tokihira's early death, the Fujiwara family directed one of his younger brothers to sponsor construction of a larger, more permanent memorial. Whatever mixture of sympathy, guilt, and dread of a malignant spirit moved them to do this, it brought joy to Michizane's faithful attendant, Misake Yasuyuki, who still presided there as Buddhist priest. In the same year, not by coincidence, the temple was given its first estate, the land and peasants of a village about six miles away. From then on, that village's output went not to the government but to Michizane's memorial. Yasuyuki sent one of his most resourceful disciples to oversee the village, and reinforced him with another follower whose chief talent

was swordsmanship; together they would insure that no neighbor encroached on the village borders, and, if opportunity presented, they might acquire a field here and there.

The government's problems seemed endless: Korean pirates, disloyal officials, loss of revenue, disorder in the provinces. The court could not control its own members, much less keep order in the country. It even had home-grown pirates in the Inland Sea; for more than a century had been issuing order after order, all toothless, to quell them.

The people in question resented being called pirates. They called themselves *suigun*, meaning "naval forces." They pointed out that they and seamen like them up and down the Inland Sea and along the coast of Kyushu had served as the country's navy when it needed one. They had manned the ships that carried envoys to China, and suffered losses in that effort. Drawing on older memories, they ruminated on the 663 debacle off Korea when their fleet carrying an army sent to rescue the already extinct kingdom of Paekche was all but wiped out by the Chinese navy.

They were members of a proud and ancient clan (they ranked their mythic ancestors with those of the imperial family), a clan that dominated the province of Iyo (today's Ehime prefecture). Besides their islands, Iyo took in the mountains and fertile valleys of the whole northeast corner of Shikoka, but the "naval forces" spurned any home but the islands.

What the court called piracy was to them only natural. When ships navigated the narrow passages through their islands they should expect to pay a toll, just as travelers on land did at customs gates thrown across roads by local powers. The islanders admitted that they could be harsh if a crew was hostile, and if an occasional cargo of, say, imports from China, was too tempting, they might take it all. They knew how to fight and they had good weapons, including prized swords that had been offered out of respect, or fear. They did not play favorites. They took a share of both government cargo destined for the court and the private shipments of officials grown rich in the provinces.

They were not rich. They fished and gathered the savory greens of the ocean. Some had a bit of land; their women clawed its rocky patches to grow vegetables. The many families without land spent their lives on their boats, which were much less grand than imagined by a chronicler a couple of centuries later: "huge rafts . . . permanent habitations covered with earth, planted with trees, and dotted with rice fields."

They were little better off than peasants but in wit and spirit they held themselves above bovine farmers. They ate better. Peasants could not eat the rice they grew, but boats bearing that rice to the capital gave up enough to fill the stomachs of the seamen's families.

Then around 935 they acquired a leader, and he was bent on serious piracy. His name: Fujiwara Sumitomo. There is argument about Sumitomo's beginnings. Some say he was the third son of Fujiwara Yoshinori, a courtier of middling rank from a line of only modest achievement within that prolific family. However, it seems quite certain that Yoshinori adopted this son while he was serving as governor of Iyo. While he was there Yoshinori was obliged to work closely with the local power that controlled the province. It is believed that a branch of that family ceded some newly developed land to Yoshinori, and that in return he adopted one of their sons, making him a Fujiwara and naming him Sumitomo. By birth, then, Sumitomo belonged to the same clan as the seamen of the islands.

Separated from his own parents when he was very young, Sumitomo grew up in the capital at a time when the court was bedeviled by the vengeful spirit of Michizane. Ostensibly he was a member of the most powerful family in the country, but he was a minor member. He also bore the stigma of being a country boy, the butt of scorn because he was born in the provinces. His foster father Yoshinori went from Iyo to a responsible position at Dazaifu, but he died young and was not around to support Sumitomo in the competition for appointment to a good position (there were never enough to go around). As he approached the age of forty Sumitomo held only Sixth Rank, still not entitled to enter the palace and be received by the emperor.

It was probably early in 931, when he was thirty-eight, that he was appointed to be secretary in Iyo, answerable to the governor and lieutenant governor. The position required only Seventh Rank, so he was overqualified, but he must have been glad to have the salary and perks that went with the office. By this time provincial governors usually stayed in the capital so that Sumitomo was number two man on the scene. He probably sought the job. It brought him back to his own people and he came as a celebrity, a courtier and a Fujiwara. He left a nervous capital: it was plagued with banditry; the palace guards were under orders to patrol the streets nightly. His wife, possibly glad to be rid of him, stayed at home as wives usually did, but he brought a young son.

One of his duties as secretary was to escort Iyo's shipments of rice and other tax goods to that capital. Each occasion involved negotiation with his distant kinsmen who controlled passage through the islands. In parleying over what part of the cargo had to be surrendered to let the rest go through, he was not overly

forceful; he and the seamen developed a cozy relationship. Another of his responsibilities as an official was to suppress piracy; he gave that duty lip service. All the while, the court continued to issue orders against piracy, continued to send officers to eliminate pirates, and continued to request prayers against pirates at shrines and temples both in the capital district and in the pirates' strongholds. Nothing changed.

When Sumitomo's term as secretary expired he did not return to the capital. He knew he had no future at the court. He foresaw better things in Iyo; he stayed. This was not unusual. Even imperial princes became fortune hunters. In 842 Dazaifu complained to the court about a certain Prince Nakai. Although he was a member of the imperial family, he, like Sumitomo, held only Sixth Rank; he had been sent to Kyushu as lieutenant governor of Bungo province. When his term was up he stayed on, a princely bully grabbing land illegally, becoming wealthy and obnoxious. The court ordered him to return home but we don't know that he paid any attention; he was living high on Kyushu.

There was an oversupply of princes. With so many women at hand, a vigorous emperor could sire an embarrassment of sons. It was a drain on the treasury to support them as royalty and each was a possible focus of intrigue. The solution was to shed them. It was simple. By giving them surnames-the imperial family had none-they were placed in the ranks of the court nobility and cut off from the imperial line. Then most were dispatched to the provinces to make their own way.

The family names most often affixed to excess princes were Minamoto and Taira. Out in the provinces men with those names founded powerful families who dominated great areas. There was no higher authority to restrain them. Only armed might counted, and they found warriors in the provinces waiting to be mobilized. They were the ancient landed gentry, local powers like the clan that dominated Iyo. When the court created its centralized system two centuries earlier, the local chiefs had been intentionally bypassed to reduce their power, but they had never yielded their authority over the countryside--as Michizane learned when he was governor of Sanuki--and many had maintained their prowess as fighting men. The court uneasily disparaged them as "the idle rich," but its own forces were a shambles and so it sometimes deputized them to maintain law and order. The great manors embraced them as troops to ward off bandits and predatory neighbors. To opportunists named Minamoto or Taira, they were natural allies, eager to pledge themselves to a strong leader for the promise of rich rewards.

Sumitomo was not a Taira or a Minamoto but he saw the potential in the seamen of his clan. He would weld their scattered groups into one formidable force.

With them he would rule the Inland Sea. He would flout the court, laugh at its weakness.

While still in office he began with a move calculated to make him a hero. In bleak midwinter he pressured a susceptible district chief into opening the district's government storehouse, liberating about fifteen thousand bushels of rice which he distributed to riotously happy peasants and seamen. His bridges burned, he announced to the seamen that he was one of them; he would lead them in campaigns of plunder that would make them all rich. The court called them pirates: they would be pirates.

Before he could get started he was frustrated by the appointment of an unexpectedly intelligent new governor for Iyo. Forgoing the usual futile military action, he offered clemency. Seamen who surrendered were given clothing, food, fields to cultivate, and seeds to plant. More than thirty leaders and 2500 men turned themselves in.

Thwarted, Sumitomo took time out. He established a headquarters on Hiburi, an island in the channel between Shikoku and Kyushu. From ancient times Hiburi's signal fires and flags had guided navigators; clan leaders sometimes retired there in old age. Sumitomo saw it as a lair: a scraggle of an island with a twisted spine of mountains and spurs that concealed bays deep enough to hide hundreds of ships.

From Hiburi he reached out to the rugged seamen and sometime marauders of Kyushu's Inland Sea coast. Many centuries earlier, the ancestors of his clan had migrated from Kyushu to Iyo, but not all of them crossed; some stayed and prospered on Kyushu's shore. Those old ties were not forgotten, and Sumitomo played on them to build a firm alliance.

Three years passed. The governor's clemency had lost its appeal; seamen abandoned their fields and returned to their boats. Sumitomo issued a call. In midwinter, as 939 gave way to 940, he assembled a fleet and moved up the Inland Sea. From Iyo the governor sent an emergency message to alert the court.

Provincial capitals were the likeliest places to find riches. More than halfway toward the capital district, Sumitomo struck at the capital of Bizen province. But they were no longer a surprise. Alarm had swept up the coast and they found little worth taking. The ranking official, lieutenant governor Fujiwara Sanetaka, had fled toward the capital with his family, a few guards, and as much treasure as they could carry. Sumitomo ordered a manhunt.

Along the way Sanetaka was joined by the chief official of Harima province. They were within a day's journey of the capital when Sumitomo waylaid them. Bound and helpless, the two officials saw their children killed and their wives raped and carried off. Finally, jeering at them, Sumitomo sliced off each man's nose and ears. The victims' attempt to flee to the capital does not seem reason enough for this outrage. Was it revenge? Had Sanetaka been ruthless in attacking pirates? Had Sumitomo nursed hatred of Sanetaka from the days when they were growing up as Fujiwara cousins, one city-bred, one yokel?

News of the savagery reached the capital the same day. Panic swept the streets. Fires raged through the most populous districts; rumors said they were a prelude to attack. On top of that, came word that in the north a Taira named Masakado was in revolt. It was a bad week for the court.

Taira Masakado's base was about as far from the capital as Sumitomo's, but in the opposite direction; his field of action was the fertile, flat land of the great Kanto plain, stretching out from the head of the bay where the city of Tokyo would one day rise. On this plain the mounted warrior came into his own in the fighting for power and territory. The forces were not large--a few dozen to a few hundred--but the battles were fierce. There were foot soldiers too, marshaled from peasants; sometimes they were sent ahead to blunt the first blow, but what counted most was the
warrior on horseback.

Masakado's grandfather--an imperial prince who was the great-grandson of an emperor--had left the imperial family, taken the name of Taira, and traveled north to settle on those broad lands and found a powerful family. His several sons (seven according to one genealogy, ten according to another) gained land and power by reclaiming marshlands and marrying the daughters of local chiefs. By Masakado's generation, his father, uncles, and cousins held large manors spread over three provinces.

When Masakado was a young man, his father sent him to the capital for a few years to acquire polish and cultivate connections with the rich and powerful. He could not have aimed higher: he served as a guard in the household of Fujiwara Tadahira, prime minister and regent for the current boy emperor. Tadahira had succeeded his brother Tokihira, Michizane's nemesis.

In 931, the same year that Sumitomo went to Iyo as secretary, Masakado received word that his father had died, and he left for home, disappointed that Tadahira had not given him rank or position. At home he found that his uncles

were hungry to carve up the estates his father had left to him. He set about to defend his lands.

It was a truculent family, as ready to fight each other as outsiders. Masakado added to the ill will by eloping with the daughter of one of his uncles, incensing her father, who wanted a more advantageous match--links by marriage were often valued more than blood ties. One after another, singly and in combination, his uncles and their sons tried to destroy him. In 935 he broke the law by pursuing one of them across a province border, and, they lodged a complaint with the court. Masakado was summoned to the capital to answer the charge, but Tadahira intervened, his offense was judged not serious, and he was pardoned in a general amnesty declared to celebrate the child emperor's coming of age.

As he was returning home in the summer of 937 with only a small body of men, his uncles twice attacked and overwhelmed them: his first defeats, made more bitter because his father-in-law seized his wife and children. Her brothers helped her escape and return to him, but Masakado, infuriated, attacked that uncle and destroyed him.

Before that, Masakado had been more attacked than attacker. Now, long-standing animosities came to a boil, not only with his Taira relatives but also with government-appointed provincial officials. He went on the offensive. Incited by questionable supporters in a neighboring province, he invaded that province, scattered its officials, and replaced them with his

own men. It had been so easy that he took over three more provinces. Conquest went to his head: he laid claim to the entire Kanto.

At this point, according to the chronicle of his life, a camp follower and prostitute who doubled as a shaman received an oracle from Hachiman, regarded as a protector of warriors; the oracle transmitted a proclamation, allegedly composed by Michizane, naming Masakado a new emperor. With divine sanction for something he had already decided to do, he proclaimed himself "New Emperor," master of the Kanto, and held an investiture service to confirm his imperial dignity.

He announced this in a personal letter to his former lord, Tadahira. He professed his loyalty, asserted that his actions had been provoked by his enemies, and appealed for understanding: "While it had not been my original intention, in the end I conquered the province of Hitachi. This was no small crime, I realized, as taking over one province was surely as grave a crime as taking over a hundred. So I went on to seize the others."

He proudly referred to his imperial lineage: "Were I to gain control of over half the land permanently, it would surely be admitted that this was my due fortune."

He boasted of his prowess as a warrior: "Who among my peers can compare with me?"

He was not attempting to overthrow the emperor, but he was asserting that the entire Kanto region was his to govern as he chose. This was rebellion. In the tense capital it was rumored that some time earlier Masakado and Sumitomo had met in the Buddhist cloisters of Saicho's Mount Hiei and, overlooking the city, had schemed how to divide the country between them.

The court was distraught. Rank and position were promised to whoever would kill Masakado. A general was given the rank of shogun and sent against him; he was expected to raise his army in the Kanto, so he would go with only a few aides and officers. Even so, it was three weeks before he left the capital.

Sumitomo was a criminal but Masakado was a rebel of imperial descent. The Minister of the Left went to his brother Tadahira, the regent, with an urgent recommendation: to buy time while they concentrated on Masakado, they should appease Sumitomo by promoting him. So while Sumitomo with several hundred pirates were terrorizing the coast of the capital district, the court raised him from

Sixth Rank to Fifth. Now he was qualified to be formally received by the emperor. A messenger was dispatched to deliver the good news but the puzzled man had no idea where to go.

Meanwhile, leaders in the Kanto took matters into their own hands. Some of the most powerful had so far held off from the fray, waiting until they could be certain of backing the winner. One who had been leaning toward Masakado decided to visit his camp for a face-to-face assessment. When he arrived, Masakado was in his tent having his hair dressed, but he was so elated when he heard who had come that he rushed out, his hair disheveled, to greet his supposed new ally. This behavior made a very bad impression on his caller. He decided that Masakado lacked imperial bearing, and he promptly allied himself with Masakado's enemy cousin. Together they attacked. Masakado's force was outnumbered but at first he pushed them back in confusion. Then, says the chronicle, the gods turned against him. His sword became heavy and "his horse failed to fly like the wind." He was struck by an arrow, and on the fourteenth day of the second month, 940, the New Emperor fell in battle. His head was sent to the capital where it was displayed on a stake. The court's shogun-general had got nowhere near the Kanto. He turned around and went home.

Word of Masakado's fall took the heart out of Sumitomo and his men. They had raided Awaji island, which almost bridges the sea between Honshu and Shiroku, and had plundered its stockpile of weapons, but the news spoiled their celebration. In wintry weather they sailed back to their

home waters. In the still panicky capital, the court commissioned an officer of the guard as a general specifically charged to destroy Sumitomo.

After six months of quiet the pirates erupted again in the autumn of 940. With four hundred ships Sumitomo scourged the ports along the east coast of Iyo and, again thrusting within range of the capital, he attacked the province of Sanuki and the headquarters where Michizane had governed. The reports submitted by the acting governor and his officer of the guards asserted that the defenders fought bravely but were overwhelmed and forced to flee southward through mountains to the next province. After the pirates, tired of pursuit they leisurely plundered and then reembarked to strike at the opposite coast of Honshu. In its harbors they caught and burned more than a hundred government warships and, near the western tip of Honshu they hit a rich target, the government mint. They burned it to the ground and made off with its stock of coins.

This time they did not get away scot free. The court's general caught up with them while they were still ashore and inflicted a bloody drubbing before they

escaped to their boat. This was Sumitomo's first reversal and, with the realization that he could be defeated, some of his leaders and their men began to drift away from him. Others may have been alienated by his cruelty and his arrogance. He could no longer boast that he could muster 1500 ships. The most damaging defector was one of his staff officers, a man who knew his strategies and his hiding places. In the early spring of 941,
that man led government forces in an attack that broke Sumitomo's hold on Iyo.

Sumitomo fled to his island stronghold on Hiburi and rallied those loyal to him. Many of the Iyo seamen responded and the Kyushu men came in force. A couple of months later, he led more than eight hundred ships through the straits between Honshu and Kyushu and into Hakata bay. Their target was Dazaifu.

Dazaifu had warning. Its defenders met the pirates at the water-gate. They did not close its conduits to create the great moat that its engineers had planned, and they were swept aside. Those able to escape to the fortified mountain behind them struggled up its cliffs to join the officials and clerks and townsfolk who had taken refuge on its height. Sumitomo had no interest in pursuing them. From the earthworks they watched helplessly as the pirates roared through the headquarters, stripping its glories, vandalizing its offices, ripping open its storehouses and exulting over the riches that poured forth--the Chinese celadons and brocades and bangles and medicines. They moved on to the town, emptying its houses and shops, swilling the liquor of its gay quarters in boozy bacchanal.

Night fell, and the watchers on the mountain saw fires, small at first, then through a pall of smoke, flaring, leaping, raging. Many wept to see the great buildings engulfed, the city consumed. At Kanzeonji desperate monks and servitors lugged buckets of water to douse sparks blown their way. They saved their buildings, but the pirates had desecrated their altars, destroyed their images, plundered their treasures.

At last the pirates wearied. With everything worth taking, they headed back to the port. Sumitomo celebrated on his ship. Hakata was in his hands, yielding still more treasure. His pirates forayed up and down the coast.

The government's general was Ono Yoshifuru. He had about two hundred ships, hardly a match for Sumitomo's eight hundred, but he sent them to Hakata, while he landed his army on Kyushu's Inland Sea coast and marched them to Hakata. There were days of skirmishing on land and on the bay. One historian describes the final encounter this way:

The day dawned with a gale that whipped up the bay, howling past the government ships toward the pirates. The bay was so rough that Sumitomo judged action impossible. He retired to his cabin to drink; the pirates and their families battened down to wait out the wind. But a government commander saw an opportunity. He collected more than a hundred small boats, packed them with dry straw, and shepherded them toward the pirates. At close range the straw was set afire and the blazing boats were cut loose. The wind drove them into Sumitomo's fleet. Flames raced from ship to ship in a sea of fire as the government ships bore in. Men, women, and children jumped screaming into the sea and drowned. Nearly all of the pirates' eight hundred ships burned and sank. A few were captured.

Sumitomo and his fourteen-year-old son somehow escaped and made their way back to Iyo. They took refuge on a wooded hill but were quickly surrounded. Both went down fighting. Their heads were sent to the capital to be mounted on stakes. Like Masakado's, they drew a gaping crowd. General Ono Yoshifuru returned to the city in triumph and was rewarded. The same shogun general who had not made it in time to fight Masakado arrived after Sumitomo end. He was indignant when he was not rewarded.

Michizane's mausoleum was far enough from Dazaifu to escape. Or perhaps Sumitomo and his pirates had no wish to antagonize so powerful a spirit.

But what had been Japan's second city was charred earth. Its officials and clerks made their way to their homes. Merchants, shopkeepers, and the women of the entertainment district picked through the rubble for something worth saving.

Taira Tadamori was annoyed. Very annoyed. A Chinese ship lay offshore loaded with goods that meant hefty profits. But here too were the pests he had he had tried to dodge: Dazaifu inspectors intent on boarding the ship, interrogating the captain, and inspecting the cargo so they could nab a considerable part of it in the name of taxes and fees.

The ship's captain was fuming. Had Taira Tadamori forgotten his assurance that at this out-of-the-way anchorage there would be no hungry officials? On the strength of that promise he had by-passed the familiar port of Hakata to sail a long, looping course southward around Kyushu's western outreaches through island-clogged passages and bays then back northward more than sixty miles to the farthest shore of the gulf called the Ariake Sea. Here, he had been assured, was the security of the estate that Tadamori managed.

Tadamori tried to cool the irate Chinese. He insisted that he could handle the situation. As manager he represented the owners of the estate, and though it was held by a temple in the capital that temple had been founded by imperial order and the estate was in fact part of the lanes belonging to the imperial family. In this year 1133 the head of the imperial family was the retired emperor Toba, the most influential man in the capital. Toba took a keen interest in the family lands. He was zealous in expanding them and he would not look kindly on any attempt to cut into the revenue they yielded.

Tadamori knew this because he was one of Toba's confidants, one of the inner circle in the retired emperor's office. He was in this fortunate position because he was chief of his Taira family, whose Taira warriors served the retired emperor. One of his rewards for faithful service, along with a series of lucrative governorships, was his lucrative assignment to manage this estate: a manager received a share of the estate's income. Toba got his money's worth; a renowned warrior gave an estate security.

A man did not achieve Tadamori's stature without being resourceful. In this instance he had in his entourage a man who had been a scribe in the retired emperor's office, drafting the missives that flowed from that office. He knew the style of such a document and he knew the signatures of the staff who would validate it. Tadamori called on those skills now, and shortly he had in hand an order, impressively signed and sealed, explicitly prohibiting representatives of Dazaifu from entering this estate. Tadamori watched as the discomfited officers rode off. Then he rewarded his scribe for felicitous forgery.

This was not an exploit that Tadamori would boast about to the retired emperor, but he knew that Toba would approve the result, and might even be amused by the method. The possessors of any estate sought to bar local officials from the estate: they were forever trying to refute the estate's tax exempt status so they could collect taxes; they took a cut on taxes collected.

An owner needed convincing documents to assert tax exemption, but he also needed fighting men to ward off predatory intruders. The government was unable to police the provinces and so, although the nobility scorned warriors, they relied on them to protect their scattered lands. Sometimes it was possible to recruit a local force, but when the aristocrats of the capital needed muscle they turned to the warrior clans, either the Minamoto or the Taira.

It is not mere coincidence that the rise of the Taira came during the century when the imperial family shook free of Fujiwara dominance. In 1068, because Fujiwara consorts had failed to produce a male heir, the Fujiwara had to accede to the enthronement of a mature man not born of a Fujiwara mother, not molded by Fujiwara upbringing. He reigned for four years and then retired, having ensured that both his successor and the next crown prince were similarly unfettered. He was the first of four vigorous retired emperors who made the imperial family-for the first time in its history-the most powerful force in the government.

There were other retired emperors during that period but only the senior counted. None of the four tried to act as emperor after retiring, but as head of the family each contrived to build the family's influence and hitherto meagre wealth.

It was the new center of power created by the retired emperors that gave the taira their opportunity. Their rivals the Minamoto had an old alliance with the Fujiwara. Fujiwara power and glory were critically dependent on the Minamoto might that maintained order and kept income flowing from vast estates. The Minamoto were "the teeth and claws" of the Fujiwara and in return they had achieved rank and position at the court. The Taira could now go after that same kind of respect by attaching themselves to the retired emperors.

There were several branches of the Taira, largely independent of each other; most were based in the northeast where they had won territory and influence. A lesser known group was closer to the capital, on territory they took over when a tough tenth-century Taira warrior, after serving as governor of Ise province, decided to settle there. From that base his descendents reached westward. By the time of his great-grandson, Taira Masamori- Tadamori's father-Taira influence had reached both sides of the Inland Sea and the west coast of Honshu. It was

Masamori who started his family's rise to glory by cultivating the second of the four retired emperors, Toba's grandfather Shirakawa.

Masumori's approach was forthright. In 1097, from his family lands, he donated 250 choice acres-with, of course, their income-producing peasants-to support an imperial temple built in memory of Shirakawa's most beloved daughter. A cordial introduction came quickly.

Shirakawa was devoted to building temples and augmenting the family's lands. Masamori contributed to both, and moved into Shirakawa's inner circle.

His status as a favorite was confirmed when he was sent to deal with a prominent Minamoto who had erupted on the west coast of Honshu, killing the governor of Izumo province and seizing tax rice. He had angered the government before: when he was the governor of Tsushima, Dazaifu had accused him of brutality against the island's people; exiled to an offshore island, he had escaped and landed in Izumo.

Masamori returned from Izumo bearing the Minamoto head, which he exposed to public view on the prison gate. Probably what was most important to Masamori, he had ousted a Minamoto from a region that the Taira intended to dominate. As a result of his success, Masamori took a place alongside the established Minamoto captains as an enforcer of the peace in the capital.

They were kept busy, Kyoto was anything but placid, a run-down city, dangerous at night. Taira and Minamoto were called upon to round up the thieves and cutthroats who infested the streets, and to face down the rampaging throngs of priest-thugs who boiled out of the great temples and shrines to battle each other or to confront the court with demands for the redress of some grievance. If they got their way, it usually called forth a howling protest from a rival institution claiming that is rights had now been trampled, and another melee had to be quelled.

Such services were rewarded. Masamori received a string of appointments to be governor of important, prosperous provinces. The governor of a province had ample opportunity to get rich: he was both tax assessor and collector, and squeezing the peasants was a fine art. Masamori's governorships made him rich and they also made him powerful, for they gave him the chance to win the allegiance of local leaders.

He was adroit in getting appointments to provinces along the Inland Sea. In this strategic region he gained the loyalty of hundreds of the minor chieftains who controlled the coastal villages and inlets that were home to seamen who fished and

ferried and doubled as pirates. They gave him a navy of boats manned by tough, skilled seamen. With them he took effective control of the Inland Sea.

He was therefore the logical choice to deal with that old problem, the Inland Sea's pirates, and more than once he was ordered to subdue them. These assignments played into his hands; they gave him the opportunity to exert discipline and crush disloyalty. The pirates he shackled and paraded through the streets of Kyoto were those who had flouted his authority. The lesson was not lost on the others.

In 1119 he was sent to Kyushu to crush insubordination on an estate that belonged to one of the great imperial temples. He took care of it easily, and the trip gave him the opportunity to see for himself Hakata's harbor, busy with Chinese ships, Chinese merchants, Chinese goods. He was already investing in the China trade and it pleased him to see the activity that was bringing him foreign luxuries and more wealth.

Kyushu lords came to pay their respects to the great warrior from the capital, and when he returned to Kyoto with the culprit's head he was flanked by more than a hundred prominent warriors from Kyushu and the Inland Sea. He was demonstrating that he dominated western Japan.

His final triumph came when he was promoted to Fourth Rank, the first Taira warrior to break into the higher ranks. He died around 1121, full of honor. Headship of the Taira passed to his son Tadamori.

Tadamorl's career took off where Masumori's had ended. By 1133, when he produced that forged order to shoo away Dazaifu inspectors, he had performed the customary duties: he had been the governor of major provinces, with a Minamoto chieftain he had repulsed riotous priest-soldiers in the capital-, and he had disciplined the pirates of the Inland Sea. He had become richer than his father, enabling him to build a temple enshrining a thousand and one Buddhist images to fulfill a vow made by retired emperor Toba. Toba was so pleased that he granted this Taira warrior the unprecedented honor of entering the palace as a courtier.

His first appearance was set for one of the harvest festivals as the year drew to a close. To introduce himself he was expected to perform a dance before the assembled court. To dance was not a problem: he had enough of a courtier's training to manage that with aplomb. But some of the nobles were so enraged at his intrusion into their precincts that they planned to assassinate him as he danced, or so rumor had it.

Tadamori took precautions. It was prohibited to go armed into the palace, but under his robe he buckled on a wooden dagger silvered to look real, and he made certain that the assembled gentlemen glimpsed it. Furthermore, he stationed a loyal retainer, sword in hand, in the garden just outside the hall.

The courtiers did all they could to upset him. In chanting his accompaniment they changed the words to insult his family as upstarts (though they were descended from a revered emperor) and to ridicule him because he was somewhat cross-eyed. Tadamori did not lose his composure. As he finished he called a woman attendant and handed over his dagger.

When it was all over, the incensed nobles raised a noisy protest, demanding that he be punished for wearing a blade and posting a guard. Called before the retired emperor, Tadamori professed ignorance about the guard, “It was the act of a loyal retainer who heard that I was in danger,” he said. “If you desire it I will punish him.” As for the dagger, he asked that it be brought forth; all saw that it was a harmless accessory. Rather than punishing him, Toba congratulated him on his foresight.

He continued as manager of the estate on the Ariake Sea until he died (he sent deputies, rarely going to Kyushu himself), and trade with Chinese merchants there and at Hakata added to his wealth. He was generous with his money: it brought acceptance.

He continued to edge his way into court society, for he wanted his family to be accepted as cultured, not just as useful enforcers. He joined poetry contests, participated in festivals, and was gallant to the ladies of the court, and liberal too, because he knew very well the power they wielded. He ended like his father Masamori in Fourth Rank, high for a warrior.

The career of his son Kiyomori picked up from there. Or was he Tadamori’s son?

It was said at the time, though not in public, that his father was the retired emperor Shirakawa. Although this is written only in the fictionalized saga of the Taira clan, it has persisted through the centuries, and respected Japanese scholars accept it today.

The story goes like this. The retired emperor set out one dark night to visit one of his favorite ladies. As his small party approached her residence, he and the courtiers escorting him panicked at what seemed to be a horrible monster. Tadamori was then only a junior officer but Shirakawa had noticed him and he was

called upon to slay the demon. To Tadamori, however, the thing seemed not so awesome, and he thought how embarrassing it would be if he used his warrior's skill against something harmless. He dashed forward and grappled with it; it turned out to be an aged monk bundled up in a straw hat and raincoat. Shirakawa was so impressed by Tadamori's combination of bravery and judgement that he bestowed on him the lady he had come to visit. She was visibly pregnant, and Tadamorl was told that if the baby was a girl, Shlrakawa would take her into the court as his daughter, but if the child was a boy, Tadamorl was to raise him as a warrior. A boy was born, Tadamorl named him Kiyomori and raised him as his son and heir. There have always been those who credited imperial parentage for Kiyomori's spectacular rise.

His first important political appointment came when he was promoted to a rank almost as high as his father's and made governor of Aki, a rich province on the Honshu side of the Inland Sea, about halfway between Dazaifu and the capital.

Governors had long since ceased to live in their provinces; they sent underlings and remained in the capital. But on being named governor, Kiyomori toured Aki, taking care to report his appointment to the province' Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. At one shrine, though it was not then the most important, he was awed.

It stands on an offshore island called Itsukushima, or sometimes Miyajima. With a sweeping vista of the Island Sea a backdrop, the shrine stretches from the shore toward a great torii that rises from the waves. At high tide its buildings and connecting galleries seem to float upon the water.

It is praised as one of Japan's three most beautiful sights, but when Kijomori first came upon it, it was sadly decayed. Even so, he was enthralled by its setting, its age-old sanctity, its neglected beauty. He spent time and riches restoring it to magnificence, he made it his family's guardian shrine, the Taira shrine, and it could not fail to prosper. He never faltered in his devotion.

There were practical considerations as well. Itsukushima was strategically located on the shipping route through the Inland Sea. Chinese ships were not then permitted to enter the Inland Sea but, looking ahead, he began major works to widen the channel between the many islands so that large boats could pass.

Aki's jagged coast afforded many small harbors that were home to seamen who were already conscious of Taira power. Kiyomori enlisted them to make Aki a Taira stronghold.

Beyond all that, his pious devotion to Itsukushima's deities had an earthly parallel. He was captivated by one of the loveliest of the shrine maidens who danced to entertain the deities and the devout. A daughter was born. Like other fathers of his station, Kiyomori acknowledged and protected the girl, and when she grew up to be pretty but (it was said) not overly bright. he placed her advantageously in the court. All of his eight daughters married well; he saw to that.

Of his many mistresses, the dancer at Itsukushima held his affection much longer than most. Twenty-five years after his term as governor had ended, a courtier who hoped to curry favor with Kiyomori by making a pilgrimage to Itsukushima pondered what gifts-necessarily expensive-he should take to the Lady. His ploy worked.

Kiyomori never let go of Aki. After his two terms as governor, he installed two of his brothers in succession, and then the head priest of Itsukushima shrine.

Still he knew that the China trade focused on Hakata. That port was the prime gateway. More than 1600 Chinese merchants clustered around Hakozaki shrine on the shore of Hakata bay. The shrine provided a hospitable environment for its satellite village and the Chinese gave generous support to

the shrine. The shrine was itself deep in trade, financing voyages, supplying Japanese goals for sale in China, sharing profits to its great advantage.

A merchant was a traveling man, and he needed a base in Japan; he gained a partner by marrying a Japanese woman. She eased the language barrier and relations with the local people, and when he was away, which was most of the time, she managed the business, ran the household, and raised their children. (Usually he had another wife and family in China.)

A peaceful businesslike Hakata depended on what was happening in Kyushu, and Kyushu was not peaceful. A new breed of warlords had emerged. Most were descended from officials who, long ago, had chosen to stay in Kyushu after finishing their assignments at Dazaifu or a provincial headquarters. Having come from the capital, they had prestige that they converted to power. They acquired land and attracted followers who became formidable bands of warriors. By Kiyomori's time Kyushu had been carved up by such chiefs. They were often at each others' throats.

The Harada were typical. Their ancestor came to Kyushu in 941 in the campaign against Fujiwara Sumitomo. He settled not far from Dazaifu and by Kiyomori's time his descendants were the strongest power in northern Kyushu.

They controlled thousands of acres of farmland and they could send more than four hundred mounted warriors against their equally pugnacious neighbors. Their territory enveloped Dazaifu, giving them a vested interest.

Dazaifu had changed. The fighting made it obvious that Dazaifu no longer controlled Kyushu as the court had originally intended it should. The position of Governor General had become a sinecure for an imperial prince whose only function was to collect the generous salary of rice and all the other goods that count as perquisites. Next in line was the Senior Assistant Governor General, but since 1121 no one holding this position had bothered to come to Dazaifu. To fill the void, Kyushu men moved up the ladder of responsibility. They padded the payroll with friends and relations; the number of secretaries, for instance, swelled from four to more than twenty. And terms of office lengthened until they became lifetime and hereditary. But local officials were competent. Taxes were collected, and that satisfied the court.

What did not change was Dazaifu's reputation for avarice. One of the last of the Senior Assistant Governor Generals who came to Dazaifu merited this half-admiring entry in the diary of a court noble: "He robbed the nine provinces and two islands clean, and did the same with Chinese goods." Another, a scholar who espoused Confucian ethics, returned to the capital with " one boat full of goods acquired legitimately and another boat full of ill-gotten goods."

Greed did not abate when Senior Assistant Governor Generals stopped coming to Dazaifu. For instance, there was Dazaifu's 1133 attempt to grab the cargo of the Chinese ship that came through the Ariake Sea to Taira Tadamori's bailiwick. Tadamori frustrated them, but that happened rarely.

The governors of Kyushu's provinces did have recourse when Dazaifu became too abusive. They could appeal to the court, and often with success. A scholar has calculated that in the 126 year span from 991 to 1117 forty percent of Dazaifu's head officials were dismissed for knavery in office.

The Chinese merchants had no such protection. They tried to maintain smooth relations with Dazaifu so as not to jeopardize business, but Dazaifu's head officials repeatedly tried to take personal control of the China trade, and the merchants filed a flood of complaints, claiming that they were cheated or not paid at all. The court ignored them.

The merchants' chief support came from Hakozaki shrine. The shrine was a major institution. Originally a branch of the Hachiman shrine at Usa, it had been moved to Hakata bay in 923 to protect against raiders from Korea. A temperate

Dazaifu would have been conciliatory toward such an eminent religious institution. Instead, there was usually acrimony.

In 1140 Hakozaki priests attacked Dazaifu inspectors and drove them away. Dazaifu's answer was to take direct control of the shrine, but relations only grew worse.

In 1151 Dazaifu sent more than five hundred mounted warriors roaring into Hakozaki. They were led by the chief of the Harada and most of the men were his: Dazaifu's army was Harada's army. They looted the shrine's storehouse, destroyed its buildings and altars, seized the property of the Chinese, and left the community devastated.

When Kiyomori heard about this he was exasperated. The Chinese restored their community, and Dazaifu rebuilt the shrine, but it took time.

The year after the raid, 1152, the clashes between Kyushu rivals was aggravated by the arrival of a thirteen-year-old scion of the Minamoto. He was Minamoto Tametomo and he was no child. (They matured early then; pirate Sumitomo's fourteen-year-old son died fighting like a man alongside his father in their last stand.)

Tametomo was tall, brawny, and wild. At thirteen he drew a bow longer and stronger than most men's and at close range he wielded a devastating long sword. Most of his father's eight sons were reckless daredevils but Tametomo was such a terror that he had to be got rid of. His father consigned him to Bungo province in far-off Kyushu, where a liegeman was nominated as guardian. Tametomo quickly reversed the relationship.

There was a streak of wildness in his family. His grandfather was that Minamoto whose stormy career was ended in Izumo province by Taira Masamori a few decades earlier. There were still some of grandfather's loyal retainers around Kyushu; they rallied to the fiery grandson.

Bungo province, facing the Inland Sea, lay southeast of Dazaifu and Harada territory. Tametomo gave himself the title of constable, magnetized a warrior band of his own, and attacked Harada. He also galloped southwest against another powerful warlord named Kikuchi. He set off a bloody free-for-all. After a couple of years of this, the court ordered Dazaifu to capture him and bring him to the capital, which was what Dazaifu had been vainly trying to do. Tametomo continued to erupt, fighting all comers.

Finally, the court pressed his father to order him home. Tametomo ignored him until he learned that because of his disobedience his father was being demoted and humiliated; to clear his father, he had to return and give himself up. Many of his followers begged to go with him, but he knew that a large force would be alarming so he chose twenty-eight warriors, just enough to satisfy form.

He reached the capital in time to join his father in a brief, bloody melee set off by animosity between two retired emperors, the senior retired emperor Toba and the junior retired emperor Sutoku. Sutoku was presumably Toba's son, but Toba didn't think so.

Sutoku's mother, Shoshi, was his grandfather Shirakawa's adopted daughter, and he made her Toba's consort. Shoshi was a charmer, but there were those who considered her a strange choice for empress: it was rumored that she had had affairs before Shirakawa adopted her, and he was thought to be overly fond of her. After her marriage to Toba she gave birth to a son but Toba believed that the father was not he but his grandfather. That son was the future emperor Sutoku. Toba always disliked him, and forty-three years later, when the long-lived Shirakawa died and Toba became the senior retired emperor, he forced Sutoku to retire and, instead of Sutoku's son, put on the throne another of his own sons by his favorite consort; a three-year-old emperor called Konoe. Sutoku was doubly resentful.

Not only were the two retired emperors on very bad terms, the Fujiwara were split by discord that had the same origin. The Fujiwara regent Tadazane had objected to Shoshi's becoming empress; it was he who wrote in his diary that it was "the strangest event in Japanese history" (one of her affairs had been with his eldest son). Tadazane's rift with Shirakawa forced him into retirement. His eldest son succeeded him as prime minister and head of the family. When Shirakawa's death finally permitted Toba to take over, he called Tadazane out of retirement. This brought about another strange event: a father coming out of retirement to wrest back authority from his son. Neither father nor son behaved gracefully. The rupture within the Fujiwara was as rancorous as that in the imperial family.

In 1155 Toba's son, the Emperor Konoe, always sickly, died without producing an heir. As his life waned there was intense scheming over who would succeed him. Among the plotters close to Toba were his favorite consort, whose relationship made her powerful, and a courtier from a lesser Fujiwara family (not the one that produced regents and chancellors) who had changed clothing to become a wily and unscrupulous priest called Shingei.

The logical choice to succeed Konoe was Sutoku's son, but not surprisingly Shinzei and the lady put forth another candidate, one of Toba's grandsons. 'Men it

was pointed out that this boy's father, Toba's fourth son, was living and there was no precedent for passing over a father to put his son on the throne.

The father had never been seriously considered for emperor. Toba considered him unqualified because he was addicted to poetry and other cultural frivolities, and had shown little interest in anything else. Perhaps, also, Toba saw flaws in his character. But Toba was persuaded that the price for making the grandson emperor was to enthrone the son first. He became the emperor Go-Shirakawa (the prefix Go meaning that he was Shirakawa the Second); Toba probably expected that he would soon retire to the life of a dilettante.

Shinzei profited, of course; having played a significant role in putting Go-Shirakawa on the throne, he quickly became one of the new emperor's favorites. He was delighted to be in the powerful inner circle, and it didn't bother him that he thought Go-Shirakawa was (in historian George Sansom's translation) "a dark [that is to say, unenlightened] ruler, without parallel in the history of China and Japan." This was also the opinion of another contemporary, who said he "did not know black from white."

Fujiwara Tadazane's eldest son profited also; now he was back in power. while Tadazane and his favorite second son were out.

As for Sutoku, any hopes that his descendants would come to the throne was dashed. He and Tadazane's second son were allied in their discontent.

Both were faced with total frustration unless they struck back. In the next year, 1156, Toba died; they saw their best chance during the ensuing days of transition. They rebelled, proclaiming that Sutoku was again emperor.

There had been rumors that this would happen, and on his deathbed Toba had called in Minamoto Yoshitomo and commanded him to guard the palace and the highways leading to the capital. Kiyomari brought his Taira warriors to join Yoshitomo's force at the imperial palace. Yoshitomo and Kiyomari were given joint command.

Most of the Minamoto were with Yoshitomo, but his fattier, Tameyoshi, and five of his sons, including Tametomo, sided with Sutoku. Most of the Taira were with Kiyomori, but his uncle, Tadamasa, and his four sons were with Sutoku. And so the two military families, like the imperial family and the Fujiwari, were divided against each other. It is this bizarre exhibition of unfilial conduct that makes this struggle repugnant to the Japanese: "There was a child who cut off his father's head, there was a nephew who cut off his uncle's head, there was a

younger brother who exiled his older brother, there was a woman who drowned herself in grief. These things are unnatural events in the annals of Japan."

This quotation is from a stirring narrative of the uprising, one of a special genre that the Japanese call "war tales." Historian Paul Varley calls the war tales "literary history, mixtures of truth and fancy." They are based on actual events but it is sometimes a problem to separate the truth from the fancy.

In this tale, Tametomo is the hero, a warrior of superb skill, strength and valor. Minamoto Yoshitomo is pictured as a spirited leader, but Kiyomari is so timid that his son Shigemori takes command of the Taira warriors.

Briefly then: The opposing forces gathered, Go-Shirakawa's at the imperial palace, Sutoku's at a detached palace. Sutoku's leaders vetoed Tametomo's advice that they make a night attack, and instead, as Tametomo had predicted, suffered a night attack. On a midsummer's night in 1156 flaming arrows set fire to the buildings behind them, and the fighting was soon over.

Tametomo had volunteered to defend a strategic gate with only his twenty-eight men from Kyushu. One of his arrows ripped through the armor of two men; another felled both a man and his horse. When his brother Yoshitomo dashed up at the head of his men, Tametomo spared him but shot the ornament off the top of his helmet as a demonstration. Finally, an unremitting mass attack overwhelmed Tametomo and his men. Of the twenty-eight Kyushu warriors, twenty-three died and the rest were wounded.

The fighting had lasted only four hours and involved only a few hundred men, but the consequences were great. For one thing, warriors had been called in to settle a dispute at the court, and no longer would they be content to serve merely as "hired swords." They would move to center stage and finally take over rule of Japan.

Minamoto Yoshitomo had contributed most to the emperor's victory, but Taira Kiyomori and priest Shinzei were close to Go-Shirokawa and they were the true victors. They were richly rewarded while Yoshitomo was slighted, and they took harrowing vengeance on the lowers. They sent a few into exile, but for most it was torture and execution such as the capital had not seen in centuries.

They exiled former emperor Sutoku to the province of Sanuki. At a place not far from the provincial capital where Sugawara Michizane had presided as governor, he became a tourist attraction, anguishing under heavy guard until they did away with him.

Kiyomori had no problem in doing away with his uncle Tadamasa. Thinking, “If I kill Tadamasa, it will surely force Yoshitomo to kill his father,” he publicly beheaded Tadamasa and his four sons in the riverbed.

Yoshitomo, handed an imperial order to behead his father, petitioned the emperor for clemency in every way he could, but he only angered Go-Shirakawa, who said that if he delayed any more, Kiyomori would be told to do it. Yoshitomo still could not bring himself to patricide, so one of his captains acquiesced, saying it would be a great disgrace for a Minamoto to be executed by a Taira, but when the time came he was blinded by tears and another man had to do it.

Soon Yoshitomo received another imperial command: “You will search for and kill all your younger brothers, especially him who is called something like Tametomo.” Knowing that he had no recourse, Yoshitomo sent out a party to find them. Tametomo escaped but the others were beheaded. He was then told: “You still have many younger brothers. However young they may be, search out all of them, except for girl children, and do away with them.” There were four by his father’s latest wife, aged seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen. A retainer went to get them at their home. Their mother was away, praying at a shrine, and the four boys came eagerly, thinking they were going to see their father. Near a mountain peak they were told the truth, and they bravely met their end; the eldest, like a warrior, cut his belly and died. When their mother learned what had happened, she threw herself in a river and drowned.

And so Yoshitomo was rewarded for leading the emperor’s forces to victory by the virtual extinction of his family.

It took them two months to find Tametomo. He had become a monk, living by begging for his food. He was brought to the capital and paraded before the emperor, nobles, and sightseers in the market place. Some of the fury had passed by then, and there was admiration for his bravery and prowess, so, after taking the precaution of dislocating the shoulder of his bow-drawing arm, they sent him into exile on an island off the Izu peninsula far to the northeast. He was not yet vanquished, however. He took control of the area, and almost fifteen years later they had to send an army to finish him off.

Kiyomori had done little fighting but his rewards were great. He was promoted to Third Rank; Yoshitomo only to Fourth. He was made governor of the rich province of Harima, strategically located on the Inland Sea; Yoshitomo got no province, only a position in the imperial guards slightly better than the one he had held previously.

Kiyomori asked for and received one other position: Senior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu. His Third Rank overqualified him for the post, but he knew what he was doing. Foreign trade, the China trade, was never far from his thoughts. He wanted no impediments to that trade. Hakata had to be orderly and businesslike, and that meant that Kyushu had to be controlled.

He did not go to Dazaifu himself. He sent a trusted liegeman as his deputy and he put kinsmen in key provinces as governors. He was confident, and rightly so, that his renown as a warrior would be enough to restrain the rambunctious lords of Kyushu.

Go-Shirakawa retired after reigning only two years, and his sixteen-year-old son became the emperor Nijo. This was as Toba had hoped, but instead of retiring to the life of pleasure that Toba had counted on, Go-Shirakawa was assertive in retirement; he overshadowed events for decades.

His most trusted adviser was Kiyomori's ally, Priest Shinei. Since Shinzei came from a lesser family of the Fujiwara, his influence and arrogance made him detested by most of the court.

One man who came to hate him was Fujiwara Nobuyori. He was of the major Fujiwara family and was headed for high position until Shinzei blocked his rise.

And there was Minamoto Yoshitomo, who had been so badly treated. Despite his grievances, Yoshitomo had reached for conciliation with Shinzei by offering his daughter in marriage to Shinzei's son. The proposal was haughtily rebuffed as coming from a coarse warrior. When a short time later Shinzei married his son to one of Kiyomori's daughters, Yoshitomo was doubly humiliated and infuriated.

Allied in bitterness, Yoshitomo and Nobuyori struck, choosing a time when Kiyomori was off on a New Year Pilgrimage. They easily seized the imperial palace, taking custody of both the emperor and ex-emperor. Shinzei had been warned and managed to escape but they tracked him down and killed him. Eliminating him had been their first objective.

With both of the imperial personages in their hands, they possessed the power to rule. They appointed their own men to all key positions. Nobuyori made himself chancellor and Yoshitomo became governor of Hurima, taking that prized province away from Kiyomori.

When Kiyomori got word of the uprising, his first inclination was to retreat to Kyushu to rally an army there. But his son Shigemori, always more of a warrior than his father, insisted that they must return to the capital and fight or be branded as rebels. They returned and took up positions at Kiyomori's mansion.

There they received a cry for help from Kiyomori's deputy at Dazaifu. Dazaifu had been attacked by a certain Hyuga Michitoshi, and Dazaifu's-that is, Harada's-warriors were unable to put him down. Little is known about Michitoshi: was he just out to grab some territory, or was he mounting a diversion to help the Minamoto? To deal with him, Kiyomori sent one of his ablest captains, Taira Iesada, the same man who, more than twenty-five years earlier, had stood guard outside the hall where Tadamori had danced his debut at the court before a hostile audience.

In the capital, as the opponents squared off, Yoshitomo had the stronger force. He wanted to attack but Nobuyori persuaded him to wait for reinforcements. Reinforcements came instead to Kiyomori and, because power went to Nobuyori's head, his supporters began to defect. Some of them disguised the emperor as a court lady, not difficult since he was still young and beautiful, and smuggled him out of the palace into Kiyomori's mansion. Others helped Go-Shirakawa escape to an imperial temple. With them gone, Yoshitomo and Nobuyori lost legitimacy: they were rebels.

In the earlier conflict Minamoto and Taira had fought on both sides, kinsmen against kinsmen. Now it was Minamoto against Taira, the two great warrior clans battling each other for supremacy.

With Shigemori in command, the Taira attacked. Kiyomori stayed behind, ostensibly to guard the emperor.

The war tale that chronicles this clash does not treat Nobuyori kindly. Frightened by the first battle cry he "grew pale and green as grass." He tried to mount his horse "but, fat and bloated as he was . . . he had difficulty mounting." Footmen restrained his spirited steed and two of his retainers pushed him up. "Perhaps because they shoved too much, he went over on the left side and fell flat on his face with a thud. They quickly raised him up and looked. He was a frightful sight, his face covered with sand and blood streaming from his nose. . . . He did not look as if he would be good for much."

Led by Yoshitomo, the Minamoto twice repulsed the Taira, but when Shigemori ordered the Taira to feign a headlong retreat, they pursued, and other

Taira warriors slipped behind them and occupied the palace. The Minamoto had no choice but to attack the Taira mansion and, outnumbered, they failed.

Nobuyori, who had run away in the confusion of battle, was soon captured and beheaded.

Yoshitomo told his men to scatter and save themselves to fight another day. Then he and three sons who had fought at his side set out to push their way through the snowy mountains to the northeast where he could raise more troops.

One son, fifteen years old, wounded and unable to keep up, begged his father to kill him so he would not hinder the others and would not fall into the hands of the Taira. Yoshitomo finally had to comply, and not much later was himself killed by a treacherous retainer. Learning of his, one son returned to Kyoto to retaliate by killing a Taira leader; he too was betrayed, and Kiyomori had him beheaded at the public execution ground like a common criminal.

The third son, Yoritomo, a fourteen-year-old who had fought like a veteran, was captured and brought to the capital, where Kiyomori ordered his captor to hold him for public execution. But Yoritomo so impressed his keeper that he hurried to the one person who might save him, the only mother Kiyomori had known, the tonsured widow of his presumed father, Tadamori. She had never ceased to grieve over the early death of a son of her own who had shown great promise, and when she was told that Yoritomo was the very image of that beloved son, she begged Kiyomori to spare this heir to Minamoto leadership. Reluctantly he acceded. Against his instincts and the advice of those around him, Kiyomori changed Yoritomo's sentence to exile in the custody of another Taira family on the distant Izu peninsula, not far from the island where his uncle Tametomo was stirring things up.

There remained Yoshitomo's three youngest sons. Their mother was his mistress Tokiwa, known as one of the most beautiful women in the capital. We are told about her flight to safety through a snowstorm, her youngest held at her breast inside her kimono, another strapped on her back, the eldest holding tight to her hand.

To force her to return with her children, Kiyomori seized and threatened to kill her mother. When Tokiwa appeared before him he was captivated, but she yielded to him only on condition that he would spare her children. The womanizer in Kiyomori overrode prudence; the three boys were consigned to temples to be raised as Buddhist monks.

The affair with Tokiwa was a disappointment: the lady's coldness did not make for pleasure. She went on to marry a Fujiwara, and for Kiyomori there was always another woman.

In due course Taira lesada marched back from Kyushu with the head of Hyuga Michitoshi. Go-Shirakawa made a little excursion to view it, and as a reward for lesada's work, Kiyomori was raised to Third Rank and the court's inner circle.

With the Minamoto disposed of, and both the emperor Nijo and ex-emperor Go- Shirakawa deep in his debt, Kiyomori was triumphant. He turned his attention to something never far from his thought, the China trade.

So that large Chinese ships could navigate the Inland Sea, he had ordered dredging to widen and deepen the channel through the crowded islands near Itukushima and the shrine he revered. (Chinese ships were not then permitted to enter the Inland Sea, but this was a detail to be dealt with later.)

Far up the coast, at a place called Fukuhara which today is part of the city of Kobe, he had undertaken construction daunting in scale and difficulty. He was building a new port: Chinese ships would come to him. Behind the port, on the slope between sea and mountains, mansions were rising for him, his kinsmen, and his close retainers. Securely within Taira territory, less than fifty miles from Kyoto but apart from its ferment and bother, Fukuhara would be his base, his headquarters, his own capital.

Back in Kyoto, he placed Taira relatives in high positions all through the government, and made them governors of major provinces, garnering income and strengthening the Taira grip on the Inland Sea and Kyushu.

He dealt adroitly with the Fujiwara, neutralizing them with the same matrimonial tactics that had been their stock in trade. They still disdained warriors but they were realists and rarely balked. Kiyomori had eleven sons and eight daughters (not all by the same wife), as well as four brothers and a stew of other relatives, including a collateral family who provided more useful kin, among them his principal wife. His daughters were a great asset: he married them to young men who would soon be important.

His position was enhanced when he was able to put his wife's young sister Shigeko in the retired emperor's household. She soon caught Go-Shirakawa's eye and in the autumn of 1161 a son was born. Since Go-Shirakawa's older son, the young emperor Nijo, had not yet produced a male heir, it was possible that this

child of Taira blood might someday be emperor- a prospect that pleased Kiyomori, the Taira, and Go-Shirakawa but not Nijo, who desperately wanted a son of his own to succeed him. Nijo was already on very bad terms with his father, and this new child soured their relationship further.

Nijo endured three anxious years before one of the palace women gave birth to a son, and then his joy was cut short by illness that he realized was fatal. Hastily he abdicated in order to make sure that his son succeeded him. Early in 1165, at the age of seven months ("extraordinarily young even by Japanese standards," writes historian G. Cameron Hurst III) the infant became the emperor Rokujo.

That did not deter Go-Shirakawa and Kiyomori. Six months later, with great ceremony, Shigeko's son was installed as crown prince and the young prince's Taira relations, especially Shigeko and Kiyomori, were appropriately honored with high rank.

Kiyomori was no longer Senior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu. A few months after crushing the Minamoto he had handed that post to one of his Fujiwara sons-in-law, the son of Priest Shinzei. That young man had followed recent precedent by staying home and collecting his salary in the capital.

In 1166 Kiyomori had his half brother Yorimori (different mother) appointed to the position. Yorimori surprised both his fellow courtiers and the Kyushu men entrenched at Dazaifu by making the journey in the late autumn of 1166. Six months later, traveling home through spring's fresh landscapes, he could take satisfaction in what he had accomplished.

All through northern Kyushu he had strengthened the bonds with the local leaders. He had formally and ceremonially found the dominant Okura as liegemen, making them proud and grateful. The powers just south of Dazaifu, Ogata in the east and Kikuchi in the west, were, he knew, less reliable, but they had professed unswerving fealty. Farther south he had not much concerned himself-it was the north where trade was centered-but there were Taira estates all through that area, and in southernmost Satsuma province the redoubtable Taira Iesada was governor and the tough Ata clan were of Taira descent.

Yorimori had taken firm control of the port of Hakata and every shrine and temple along the coast, putting a stop to the disputes that had so disrupted trade. He had cemented relations with the other big shrines and temples, all of them busy traders. Michizane's memorial temple Anrakuji was already in the Taira fold: its manager, designated by the Sugawara family in the capital, was a sycophant named Anno, who, to curry favor, had built a mansion for himself at Fukuhara near

Kiyomori's. It had not been so easy to deal with the powerful Hachiman shrine at Usa. There was old animosity between Usa and Dazaifu, and more than once the shrine had appealed to the court, charging Dazaifu with illegal taxation and extortion. Yorimori smoothed things over and had the chief priest appointed to a position at Dazaifu as high as any Kyushu man had ever attained.

In short, Yorimori did more than anyone else to tighten the Taira grip on Dazaifu, Hakata, and northern Kyushu.

Yorimori was still on his way home when Kiyomori capped a series of rapid promotions by leapfrogging the two highest positions in the regular government-Minister of the Right and Minister of the Left-to become chancellor of the realm with Junior First Rank. No military man had ever before achieved that office or that rank, the highest that any subject could reach in his lifetime. He took advantage of his exalted position to lift the ban on Chinese ships entering the Inland Sea; now his channel-dredging and port-building would pay off.

Having demonstrated that no place in the government could be denied him, he resigned after a few months. He was not well and he worried about the next life: he took the tonsure, entered the Buddhist priesthood, and retired to Fukuhara. For his brief service as chancellor he received large tax-free estates in three provinces.

Priestly robes did not inhibit his politicking. By now it was obvious that he and Go- Shirakawa intended that Nijo's son Rokujo have a very brief reign. Early in 1167 the three- year-old Rokujo "abdicated" and Go-Shirakawa's eight-year-old Taira son became the emperor Takakura. The court was used to intrigue but this raw maneuver caused nervous misgiving.

In the spring of the next year, Go-Shirakawa made one of his many pilgrimages to Kukai's great monastery on Mount Koya, a journey of three or four days from the capital. He took with him the prime minister and most of the high officials, each with his attendant courtiers, grooms, and drudges. There were, presumably, no ladies, since women were not permitted on the sacred mountain (they could be parked at its base, where the steep climb begins).

It was cherry blossom time, and the long procession of sedan chairs, horses, and footmen was a pretty sight as it wound through the fields and foothills.

On his way home, the ex-emperor chose to drop in on Kujomori at Fukuhara, perhaps with some gaiety in mind after the asceticism of the monastery. Fukuhara was noted for partying, and the two happy conspirators had much to be merry about.

Go-Shirakawa was back at Fukuhara the next year. A Chinese ship was in port, and Kiyomori introduced the merchant-captain to the ex-emperor. When they heard of this in the capital, courtiers were appalled that an imperial personage had come face to face with a merchant, and, worse, a foreigner, but Go-Shirakawa probably enjoyed slumming and without doubt he was showered with gifts.

He made other such friendly visits and even joined Kiyomori on a trip to Itsukushima and the Taira shrine.

In 1171 Go-Shirakawa and Kiyomori drew even closer: the ex-emperor adopted Kiyomori's daughter Tokuko, then sixteen years old, and made her the consort of the ten-year-old emperor Takakura. If, when these teen-agers got around to it, they were to produce a son, Kiyomori would be grandfather of the next emperor. This was the relationship that enabled the Fujiwara to dominate the government for almost two centuries, yet Go-Shirakawa still believed that he was manipulating Kiyomori. Dark and devious though Go-Shirakawa was, at this point one must question his perspicacity. Realization that Kiyomori was using him came slowly and, as it did, the relationship soured.

The aristocrats of the court had never accepted Kiyomori or his tribe, deploring that they had gained preeminence "simply for killing people." Taira arrogance grew more offensive. For instance, there was the occasion when Kiyomori's young grandson, on his way home from a music lesson, met the carriage of the Fujiwara regent. The youngster not only refused to give way but let his followers smash the regent's carriage and humiliate him. The boy's father, Shigemori, instead of disciplining his son, ordered that the regent be attacked again: when he was on his way to the court, his attendants were dragged from their horses and his procession scattered.

Such behavior bred plots against the Taira. Most were inept and came to nothing. Kiyomori's fiendishly efficient intelligence system uncovered others and terminated them with murder. The most serious came to light in 1177. Close associates of Go-Shirakawa had been conspiring at a villa in the hills outside Kyoto, certainly with the ex-emperor's encouragement. Vengeance was swift and brutal. One of the group, a priest, was tortured and executed, the others were exiled. Kiyomori took no overt action against Go-Shirakawa, but he had been warned.

Toward the end of the next year, 1178, a son was born to the young couple in the imperial palace. A month later Kiyomori had the infant made crown prince. Go-Shirakawa had been outwitted and overpowered.

In the summer of the next year, Kiyomori's first son and heir, Shigemori, fell seriously ill. One story says that, sickened by the violence all about him, he prayed for death.

A famous Chinese physician was in Hakata at the time, and Kiyomori begged his son to let that man treat him. Shigemori refused, saying that, if his death was ordained, no doctor could help him, and if the Chinese did cure him it would cast shame on Japanese physicians. The Chinese doctor remained in Hakata and in the early autumn Shigemori died. The Taira had lost their ablest commander.

Shigemori has been praised as a more stable and temperate man than Kiyomori, and a restraining influence. But it is doubtful that he could have reined in his father at this point. Kiyomori knew that he was getting old and he was driven to perpetuate Taira supremacy by any means.

Toward the end of the year he forced a mass dismissal of officials he believed loyal to Go-Shirakawa; some were exiled, two were executed, one committed suicide. The ex- emperor was taken to a palace where he was kept in seclusion under tight guard.

Early in 1180 emperor Takakura was forced to abdicate and Kiyomori's grandson, a little more than one year old, became the emperor Antoku. The child emperor was heavily guarded by Taira warriors; warriors were everywhere in the uneasy capital. Kiyomori's arrival from Fukuhara with more soldiers increased the tension.

In the sweltering rainy season another conspiracy was uncovered. Distant exile was ordered for an imperial prince, one of Go-Shirakawa's sons. His co-conspirator, the instigator of the plot, was an elderly Minamoto courtier whom the Taira had tolerated, but also ridiculed, as a harmless token Minamoto. The two men tried to escape but were caught and killed.

Kiyomori had had enough of the capital. He ordered the court to move to his refuge at Fukuhara. He led the procession: the infant emperor Antoku, his father the ex-emperor Takakura, Takakura's father the ex-emperor Go-Shirakawa, and the high officials of the government. Go-Shirakawa was escorted by Kyushu warriors led by Harada; Kiyomori was calling for support from that far away.

The court moved unwillingly. They were prepared to hate Fukuhara, and they did. There weren't enough mansions ready for them. (The prime minister fared well enough: he occupied the mansion that Anrakuji's manager, Anno, had built for himself.) They were pained at being in the provinces, distressed at being

cramped between sea and mountains, depressed by the it mournful" sound of the waves. They were loud in their complaints.

Far worse for Kiyomori was word that the imperial prince, before he was hunted down and killed, had managed to issue a princely edict calling on the Minamoto to rise up and smite the Taira. And that Minamoto Yoritomo, whose life he had reluctantly spared twenty years earlier, was gathering troops to answer the call.

It was decided to dispatch an army against Yoritomo at once, before he could rally support. Bereft of his ablest general, Shigemori, Kiyomori turned to Shigemori's twenty-three- year-old son, hoping that he had inherited his father's ability. The son was a polished courtier; he had been praised for his dancing at Go-Shirakawa's fiftieth birthday party. Under his command, thirty thousand men marched out from Fukuhara. They continued through Kyoto without pause, and the chronicles say that by the time they approached the Minamoto reinforcements had swelled their numbers to seventy thousand. (The chronicles often exaggerated troop strengths, but certainly the Taira had a mighty army.)

Yoritomo, had been having problems. In the twenty years since Minamoto and Taira fought each other old hatreds had faded and new alliances had been formed. Neither family members nor traditional vassals rushed to join him, and many were openly hostile.

Nor was Yoritomo himself initially enthusiastic about going to war. He was comfortably situated in the territory of the Taira leader to whom he had been consigned when he was exiled in 1160. He had married that man's daughter; they had eloped the night before she was to marry another man, but his father-in-law had warmly approved the marriage and even offered to become Yoritomo's vassal.

But when the call to arms became public, Yoritomo had to act because he had become a target. The foes he faced were not Kiyomori's force but Taira partisans all around him. In his first engagement he pitted three hundred men against an enemy's three thousand; he was soundly defeated and barely escaped with his life. But he managed to reach the territory of a loyal Minamoto vassal and gradually other leaders joined him. Many of them were Taira. What was important to a man was to protect his territory; allegiance to the dominant power in the region could do that, loyalty to some distant relative could not. Three months after the opening of hostilities Yoritomo led a force (the chronicles say) of 200,000 men.

The Uji River flows from the slopes of the great mountain. On the twentieth day of the Tenth Month of 1180, Taira and Minamoto faced each other across the

river, poised for the first battle of the war. During the night, a Minamoto scout, moving through the marsh at river's edge, startled the flocks of wild birds nesting there. They took to flight, honking and flapping their broad wings. The Taira thought the Minamoto were staging a night attack; they fled in panic. In the morning the Minamoto found only some abandoned armor.

Yoritomo considered pursuit but his chief vassals advised him to return to his headquarters at Kamakura. There he set about to unify the eastern region and consolidate his power.

For their part, the Taira had had enough of campaigns in the east; they confined themselves to the capital area. They had earlier burned the great temple called Miidera on Lake Biwa because it had sheltered the prince who had issued the call to arms. Now Kiyomori took revenge against the Nara temples that had offered sanctuary to the fugitives, though they were killed on the way and never got there. The Todaiji and the Kofukuji were attacked and burned. The Kofukuji was the hereditary temple of the Fujiwara, splendid in buildings and art. The Todaiji, founded by the emperor Shomu, housed the Great Buddha. Its face dissolved in the flames, the head toppled to the ground and the body melted into a formless mass. Hundreds of monks, men, women, and children had crowded into both temples for protection against Taira warriors. They all perished. The year 1180 closed on this senseless vengeance. The Taira had earned a multitude of new enemies.

About two weeks later, the ex-emperor Takakura died. Son of Go-Shirakawa, father of the child emperor Antoku, he had fallen ill a year earlier, shortly after he was forced to abdicate, and his condition had deteriorated during the difficult months of Fukuhara. Kiyomori had provided a Chinese ship to take him to Itsukushima. There Kiyomori's mistress cared for him while the whole establishment concentrated on powerful prayer, but prayer had not helped. He was only twenty.

A report came in from Dazaifu: Kikuchi had rebelled. Harada was able to put him down, but only after hard fighting all across Kyushu; luckily for the Taira, Kikuchi's neighbor to the east, Ogata, had not joined him. Other couriers brought word of more uprisings in the provinces.

In the month following Takakura's death, Kiyomori fell ill. Gossip said that he was stricken with a raging fever as punishment for destroying the temples, that his body was so hot his bath water boiled. He died less than two months after Takakura. Leadership fell to his third son, Munemori, who reported that the only memorial his father wanted was Yoritomo's head laid on his grave.

There was little fighting during the rest of 1181. Munemori led a small force in a minor victory over Yoritomo's uncle Jukiie when he ventured near the capital, but the Taira did not pursue their advantage.

In the autumn, Yoritomo proposed an end to the fighting if the court would recognize the Minamoto as protectors of the east and the Taira as protectors of the west. Go- Shirakawa would have accepted the proposal but Munemori rejected it; he said his father on his deathbed had demanded that the Minamoto be destroyed.

Things were quiet through most of 1182 as well. Yoritomo was occupied with solidifying his position and creating a system of government for his territory and his vassals, some of whom hated each other and had to be reconciled under his banner.

And he developed Kamakura into a capital; not a fortress-he never contemplated building a castle or fortifications, but a city of handsome residences and offices, centered on its ancient shrine to Hachiman. Yoritomo revered this shrine as Kiyomori had revered Itsukushima.

In Kyoto the Taira were concerned with defense and with keeping order in a city racked by pestilence, fires, and a succession of natural disasters attributed to evil deeds and vengeful spirits. For most of its population, the capital was a miserable place to live, and it was difficult to govern.

The long quiet interlude was ended in mid- 1183 by a man who worried both Yoritomo and the Taira: Yoritomo's cousin Yoshinaka. Although Yoshinaka had been one of the first to declare fealty to Yoritomo, both men knew he was more rival than ally. But Yoshinaka was a Minamoto, and when he loomed as a threat to Kyoto, the Taira were roused to attack. The army they sent against him was utterly defeated. The Taira fled to the west with their child emperor; to their dismay, Go-Shirakawa eluded them. As their red
flags drained out of the capital, the white flags of the Minamoto swept in.

The Taira had not gone far when Kiyomori's half brother, Yorinori-he who had done so much to make Kyushu a Taira bastion-turned and went back. It was his mother who had successfully pleaded with Kiyomori to save Yoritomo's life, and he believed, rightly as it turned out, that Yoritomo would treat him well. He had faithfully served Kiyomori as long as he lived; now he cast his lot with the Minamoto.

The Taira had only seven thousand horsemen, all that were left after

their defeat. They spent one night at Fukuhara. In the morning they burned the mansions that had been Kiyomori's pride and, sadly taking leave of that symbol of Taira might, they boarded boats for Kyushu. In the early autumn of 1183, a month after abandoning Kyoto, they reached Dazaifu.

Harada Tanenao's family made way, and the emperor, his mother, his grandmother, and their attendants took over. They had little reason to complain, but the billets of the others, spread all around Dazaifu town and countryside, were less than luxurious.

Only Harada Tanenao stayed with them. Kikuchi had been obliged to send warriors to bolster the Taira in the capital, and he accompanied them in their flight, but now he retired to his own territory and ignored repeated commands to rejoin them. Nor did other Kyushu lords appear.

The night of their arrival, the Taira leaders gathered to pray at Anrakuji. On their way, they sent up incense and prayers at Dazaifu's Kanzeonji, but they felt uneasy there because Kanzeonji had become a branch of Nara's Todaiji and they had burnt the Todaiji to the ground. They felt no constraint at Anrakuji, Like Michizane, they were courtiers in exile, and they felt close to his spirit. At other temples and shrines maidens danced for the gods, but at Anrakuji poems were offered for the divine pleasure. All night long they composed verses linked in sadness.

Recalling the past,
the gods well understand
our nostalgia
for the ancient capital
where we had dwelled so long.

They traveled to Usa to pray at its shrine dedicated, like the Minamoto shrine at Kamakura, to the deity Hachiman. The emperor was lodged in the residence of head priest Kinmichi, those of high rank stayed in the sanctuary; the other halls and courtyards were crowded with warriors and their red banners. Toward dawn on the last night of their seven- day retreat, their leader Minemori received a divine message in a dream: They could expect no help from the god of Usa.

As autumn deepened, so did their gloom. Then came word that Ogata, the powerful lord of Bungo province, was about to attack them. They sent three thousand mounted warriors against him but he easily turned them back, and they fled Dazaifu, the place they thought they would always be safe. After a fruitless

attempt to find another haven on Kyushu, they crossed the Inland Sea to Sanuki and a point of land called Yashima. They put up some buildings on the shore but nothing fit for their emperor, who stayed gently rocking on his boat.

In the capital, Go-Shirakawa had stripped the Taira of their positions and their rank, but he was unable to get Yoshinaka to pursue them; Yoshinaka feared that if he left the capital, Yoritomo would move in behind him. He did send small forces on a couple of forays; they were routed by bands of Taira. Encouraged by these small successes, the Taira crossed to Honshu and a familiar site not far from Fukuhara. There they encamped on a narrow stretch of beach called Ichinotani. At either end it could be defended by a few men, and it was backed by a cliff hundreds of feet high and so steep it looked impregnable. At Ichinotani they were within striking distance of the capital and they dreamed of returning to it.

Yoshinaka was floundering. He sent agents to the Taira proposing that they unite with him against Yoritomo; Munemori flatly refused. Yoshinaka then extracted from Go- Shirakawa a mandate to attack Yoritomo.

Yoritomo was aware of all this. He had been secretly in touch with Go-Shirakawa; now he was ready to move. Two of his younger half brothers, Tokiwa's sons Noriyori and Yoshitsune, had joined him early in the struggle. He gave each of them an army, a total of sixty thousand men, and in the first month of 1184 sent them into action. They advanced swiftly and when Yoshitsune made a daring crossing of the Uji River not far from Kyoto, Yoshinaka was taken by surprise. His army was caught between the two forces; it was defeated and he was killed. Yoritomo was undisputed head of the Minamoto. Go-Shirakawa promptly empowered him to subdue the Taira.

A week after entering the capital, the Minamoto armies were on the move again. Ten days later they were at Ichinotani, fighting fiercely in the narrow confines at both ends of the beach but making no headway. Yoshitsune took just seventy men and circled around to the height above the beach. Startled, some deer plunged down the precipice. Where deer can go, so can our horses, Yoshitsune shouted, and he led his men slipping and sliding through brambles and scrub more than eight hundred feet down that almost vertical cliff. Shouting battle cries they burst into the middle of the Taira camp. They torched some buildings and the wind carried the flames roaring down the beach. In billows of black smoke, Taira warriors ran to their boats. Overloaded, three big boats sank. On others, those aboard swung swords to slash off the arms of men trying to scramble in. Corpses littered the beach and bobbed in the waves. The sea turned red. A thousand Taira died, but most of the Taira army and most of its leaders escaped back to Yashima. The Minamoto could not follow them: they had no boats.

Again the fighting stopped. All of the west was Taira territory; it had to be softened up before it was invaded. Yoritomo sent an agent into Sanuki to win over the local lords behind the backs of the Taira. He sent men into other provinces of Shikoku and into Kyushu. Enlisting local leaders was vital: they could provide not only men but boats and seamen to carry Minamoto warriors who had no knowledge of the sea.

Six months after Ichinotani, Yoritomo dispatched an army from Kamakura with Noriyori in command. Yoshitsune was not considered available: he was Yoritomo's deputy in the capital, it was necessary to have a blood relative of high standing there to show respect for the court and Go-Shirakawa.

Noriyori's mission was to march down Honshu, enlisting allies wherever he could, and then cross into Kyushu to win over or defeat its pro-Taira lords. He reached the western end of Honshu in about two months, and there he stalled. He had not won the support of leaders who could supply boats. His army sat there for three months. The men grumbled, some deserted. Yoritomo had to send thirty-two boats of provisions, and he grew impatient. The Taira was still lodged at Yashima and Noriyori was deadlocked.

Yet Yoritomo was reluctant to give Yoshitsune an army. Relations were strained between the two brothers. Yoritomo had laid down a strict order that no Minamoto was to receive any reward unless he recommended it. This was affirming a basic tenet of vassalage: a man can serve only one master, he cannot be obligated to another.

Yet Go-Shirakawa had conferred and Yoshitsune had accepted court appointments. It caused a furor in Kamakura. Go-Shirakawa, as always a devious manipulator, was aiming to drive a wedge between the brothers. Yoshitsune believed that Yoritomo had not properly rewarded him for his successes, and he accepted Go-Shirakawa's appointments as an act of defiance. It was one stubborn man jousting with another just as stubborn.

But finally, to get the campaign moving, Yoritomo overcame his misgivings. On the first day of the new year, 1185, Yoshitsune was commissioned to lead a new Minamoto force. He moved quickly. He assembled boats, and in the middle of the Second Month, in a storm that immobilized the rest of his army and its leaders, he left with a hundred and fifty men and their horses in five boats.

The storm carried them many miles past Yashima. They rode through the mountains to appear behind Yashima. Yoshitsune maneuvered to make it appear

that he had a large force, and the Taira took to their boats. Two days later the rest of the Minamoto appeared and the Taira fled toward Kyushu.

Over the next month, Shikoku leaders came to Yoshitsune with men and boats. When he sailed against the Taira he had more than eight hundred boats manned by sailors who knew how to fight at sea.

When they learned what had happened at Yashima, other lords brought boats to Noriyori. He landed his army in Bungo, where Ogata welcomed him, and then wheeled his force north to block the Taira from landing on Kyushu. Only Harada faced him, but could not stop him.

The Taira, with their naval strength, were in their element. They chose to fight in the narrow straits between Kyushu and Honshu, where the tide rushes through with great force. They attacked in the early morning; with the tide carrying them, they bore down on the Minamoto. Their attack failed, and in midmorning the tide reversed, carrying them back, helpless to ward off the Minamoto warriors who boarded their boats. A few escaped, some were captured, but their young emperor and most of the Taira drowned.

The greatest of the war tales tells their story. It begins with these lines:

The sound of the bell of Gion Temple echoes the impermanence of all things. The hue of the flowers of the teak tree declares that they who flourish must be brought down. Yea, the proud ones are but for a moment, like an evening dream in springtime. The mighty are destroyed at the last, they are but as the dust before the wind.