

# Slaying the Serpent : Comparative Mythological Perspectives on Susanoo' s Dragon Fight

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# Slaying the Serpent: Comparative Mythological Perspectives on Susanoo's Dragon Fight

DAVID WEISS

“Japanese mythology, too, is a part of the world and should be examined as such; after all it remains true that Japan is an island nation only in a geographical, but not in a cultural sense.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

**Y**<sup>AMATA</sup> *no orochi taiji* 八岐大蛇退治 or the “Slaying of the Great Eight-Headed Serpent” is without doubt one of the most iconographic scenes in the ancient Japanese myths related in the court chronicles *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan, 720).<sup>2</sup> A brief summary of the narrative should suffice to show that the subject of the tale is by no

means unique to the Japanese tradition. A traveler from a distant land learns that a maiden is to be devoured by a giant reptilian monster that demands a sacrifice every year. He devises a clever plan, slays the monster, and marries the maiden. The traveler is Susanoo (*Kojiki*: 須佐之男; *Nihon shoki*: 素戔鳴), the shady little brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu 天照 who has just been banished from his sister's heavenly realm. In Izumo (the eastern part of present-day Shimane Prefecture) he chances upon an old couple who tearfully tell him how an eight-headed serpent that spans eight mountains and eight valleys had appeared each year to devour one of their eight daughters. Now only one daughter is left and the time of the monster's appearance is drawing near. Susanoo promises to rescue the maiden if in return he is promised her hand in marriage. When her parents agree, Susanoo transforms the maiden into a comb that he sticks in his hair. He manages to slay the serpent by getting it drunk and hacking it to pieces in its stupor. In its tail, he finds the precious sword Kusanagi (*Kojiki*: 草那芸; *Nihon shoki*: 草薙), which he offers up to his sister. Then he finds a suitable place to build his palace and at length consummates his marriage.<sup>3</sup>

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The author would like to thank the two anonymous readers for their thoughtful comments.

1 Antoni, “Japanische Totentwelt,” p. 91. All translations by the author, unless otherwise stated.

2 The characters for *yamata no orochi* provided in the text follow the *Nihon shoki*. The *Kojiki* uses the following characters: 八俣遠呂知. Due to the characters used to write *yamata* in both works, the term is often interpreted to mean “eight-forked,” but John Bentley argues that *mata* is an old word for “head,” being cognate with the Early Middle Korean “head” 麻帝 (\**matay* or \**matæ*). Bentley, *Sendai Kuji Hongi*, p. 177, note 6.

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3 *Kojiki*, pp. 68–73; *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 90–102. In addition to the main version, the *Nihon shoki* contains five variants of this

In this paper, I will subject the Japanese tale to a narratological analysis by comparing it to a number of international dragon-slayer tales. In doing so, I will place special emphasis on two aspects that the Japanese narrative has in common with other tales of this type, namely the dragon's connection to water and to metal.<sup>4</sup> I will supplement this narratological analysis with an examination of historical sources and archaeological artifacts in order to draw a connection between the *yamata no orochi* myth and the arrival of new metallurgical techniques from the Asian mainland in Kofun-period Japan (250 CE–600 CE).

Such an approach, I believe, can fruitfully complement recent works by literary studies scholars like Kōnosshi Takamitsu who regard the *Kojiki*, the *Nihon shoki*, and other ancient sources as literary works, each of which has its own internal structure and coherence, and expresses a specific worldview. Such studies tend to emphasize the differences between particular sources rather than their similarities, let alone parallels outside Japan.<sup>5</sup> To give one concrete example, Kwōn Tongu in a recent study describes the Susanoo of *Kojiki* and the Susanoo of *Nihon shoki* as “completely different deities (*mattaku betsu no kami*).”<sup>6</sup> For him, the *Nihon shoki*'s Susanoo is a purely evil deity, since the work's internal yin and yang structure calls for a negative counterpart to Amaterasu, whereas the *Kojiki*'s Susanoo is purified by Amaterasu and ultimately becomes a great heroic deity.<sup>7</sup> While it is not my intention to deny the differences between the two chronicles and their relevance for an assessment of the respective sources and their agendas, this interpretation seems to exaggerate the differences while passing over the similarities in silence. I would rather speak of two particular articulations of a common idea—in this case, a deity—both of which

function as specific representations of the universal character of the dragon-slayer in the tale under discussion.

As Hayashi Michiyoshi points out,

Myths are universal and particular at the same time. While on the one hand motifs and structures that are common to many peoples are found in mythology, significant differences can be discovered between different mythologies if one looks at how these common motifs are used.<sup>8</sup>

Bearing these caveats in mind, I will endeavor to point out both universal and particular aspects of the *yamata no orochi* myth. For example, I will demonstrate in the following pages that the dragon or serpent's connection to water is a universal theme that can be observed in myths and folktales around the globe. However, the idea of the dragon as giver or withholder of rain had to be adapted to the Japanese cultural context in order to remain relevant. Thus, the myth became linked to the water-intensive business of wet-rice cultivation. This example also demonstrates another point that will be central to the following analysis: myths change over time. They take on new meanings as they are adapted to changing geographical, social, cultural, or economic circumstances. The *yamata no orochi* myth as it is related in the ancient court chronicles is thus the result of a long evolution. I will argue that the Japanese tale is an articulation of the universal or nearly universal dragon-slayer myth. However, since it accreted various layers of meaning over time and space, being adapted to the specific living conditions of the groups who received and transmitted it, the tale differs quite substantially from other articulations of this mythical theme.<sup>9</sup>

episode, some of which leave out important components such as the slaying of the serpent (var. 1), Susanoo's marriage (var. 4), or both (var. 5).

4 The term “dragon” is used broadly in the present study to denote a reptilian or serpentine monster. Often dragons are depicted as multiheaded and capable of flight. As will become apparent, these creatures share some characteristics such as their close connection to water, thunder, and metal in myths and folktales around the globe.

5 See, for example, Kōnosshi, *Kojiki to Nihon shoki*.

6 Kwōn, *Susanoo no henbō*, p. 128.

7 Ibid. Kwōn limits himself to the *Nihon shoki*'s main version of the myth and, following Kōnosshi, *Kojiki to Nihon shoki*, pp. 110–12, chooses to ignore all the mythical variants contained in the same source.

8 Hayashi, *Mikoto to miko*, p. 6.

9 Nakanishi Susumu has pointed out that the myth of Susanoo consists of various layers of meaning. Nakanishi, *Ama tsu kami*, p. 205. In his dissertation completed in Vienna in 1935, the anthropologist Oka Masao linked certain mythical motifs with material artifacts, religious ideas, and modes of social organization and subsistence in order to reconstruct so-called cultural strata of ancient Japan. He connected these strata with successive waves of immigration from different regions like Indonesia or Korea that brought their own religious ideas, forms of social organization, and cultural technologies with them to Japan. Oka, *Kulturschichten in Alt-Japan*. On Oka and his connection to the Viennese School of Ethnology, see, for example, Kreiner, *Nihon minzokugaku*. Although many of Oka's conclusions did not stand the test of time, his approach inspired the present analysis.

Any fundamental changes in the transmitting group's life experience, such as the emergence of a new cultural technique like wet-rice cultivation or metallurgy, by necessity leads to an adaptation of the myth as well.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise the myth would lose its significance for the group and eventually be forgotten. I follow Alan Dundes' definition of myth as "a sacred narrative explaining how the world and mankind came to be in their present form."<sup>11</sup> In other words, myth "explains the why and how of the here and now."<sup>12</sup> This definition implies that a myth would lose its *raison d'être* as soon as it is no longer linked to the everyday experiences of the transmitting group. Migration, of course, amounts to a fundamental change in a group's everyday life. Thus, myths traditionally transmitted by the migrant group might no longer be appropriate in their new living environment and have to be modified or vanish. An analysis that takes these dynamics of mythical adaptations and reformulations into consideration will not only further our understanding of a particular episode of Japanese mythology but also allow us to place the genesis of this episode in the context of both Asian and world history.

### The Myth of the Dragon Fight

"The Dragon-Slayer" (ATU 300) is one of the best known and most widely distributed tale types documented in the international folktale index originally devised by Antti Aarne and later modified by Stith Thompson and Hans-Jörg Uther.<sup>13</sup> The index summarizes the plot in the following manner: a youth with three wonderful dogs comes to a town and learns that once a year a dragon demands a virgin as a sacrifice. This particular year, the king's daughter is to be sacrificed and the king offers her hand in marriage to whoever might rescue her. With the help of his dogs, the youth overcomes the dragon and then disappears. In the meantime, an impostor claims the reward, but the dragon-slayer returns in time, unmaskes the impostor, and marries the princess.<sup>14</sup> The closest parallel to this

type in Japanese folklore is the narrative of "The Monkey-God Slayer" (Ikeda 300) that is attested in fifty versions by Ikeda Hiroko.<sup>15</sup> Although the "Slaying of the Great Eight-Headed Serpent" lacks the motifs of the dogs and the impostor, it is usually subsumed under the same type.<sup>16</sup>

As it is related in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, the narrative is not a folktale, however, but a true myth insofar as it addresses fundamental questions of human existence.<sup>17</sup> In this context, Nelly Naumann draws attention to the eight-headedness of the monster. While dragons are imagined as multiheaded beasts in many cultures, the number eight has a specific meaning in Japanese myth: it represents "totality."

Like the eight islands [of Japan] or the eight mountains and the eight valleys [mentioned in the *yamata no orochi* myth] are an image of the mundane world, the eight-headed serpent monster is the symbol of an all-destroying force. This force has to be destroyed in order to save the world.<sup>18</sup>

Similar interpretations have been suggested for dragon-slayer myths outside Japan as well. Thus, the dragon in the Indo-European as well as in the Near and Middle Eastern traditions has been regarded as a symbol of chaos: "The dragon symbolizes Chaos, in the largest sense, and killing the dragon represents the ultimate victory of Cosmic Truth and Order over Chaos."<sup>19</sup> This cosmic struggle found expression in myth as a fight between "the sky god as champion of order" and a dragon, the "demon of disorder."<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, Miura Sukeyuki regards the myth of Susanoo's fight with the eight-headed serpent as a tale of conflict between culture and nature. He views

<sup>10</sup> Such adaptations could be achieved with relative ease as long as the myth in question is not fixed in writing. Van Baaren, "Flexibility of Myth," pp. 218-24.

<sup>11</sup> Dundes, "Madness in Method," p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Van Baaren, "Flexibility of Myth," p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> The acronym ATU refers to the classification according to the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index.

<sup>14</sup> Uther, *Types of International Folktales*, vol. 1, p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> Ikeda, *Type and Motif Index*, pp. 68-70.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; Seki, "Yamata no orochi," p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> I distinguish myths from other forms of folk narrative like folktales (which are recognized as fictional by the society transmitting them) and legends (which are set in a specific historical period). I am fully aware that this distinction is a modern European one, but still find it useful for analytical purposes. See, for example, Bascom, "Forms of Folklore"; Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, pp. 5-8; Dundes, "Madness in Method"; Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*, p. 21. It would be a mistake to draw overly sharp distinctions, however, since the same motifs can and do appear in all three categories of narrative. Doty, *Mythography*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Naumann, *Mythen des alten Japan*, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p. 299.

<sup>20</sup> Fontenrose, *Python*, pp. 218-19.

the serpent as a river god and hence as a symbol of nature, whereas he believes the maiden who is about to be sacrificed to the monster to be the symbol of a rice field, as her name Kushiinada-hime 寄稻田姫 or “Lady Wondrous Rice Paddy” suggests.<sup>21</sup> The annual sacrifice of a daughter to the river god can thus be interpreted as a contract between Kushiinada-hime’s parents and the river god that ensures a rich harvest. In this situation, the culture hero Susanoo descends from heaven and asks for Kushiinada-hime’s hand in marriage. Her parents agree, thereby breaking their contract with the river god and entering into a new one with Susanoo. In both cases, Miura points out, they lose their daughter to the representative of an otherworld. The crucial difference in his view is that whereas the daughters sacrificed to the eight-headed serpent had only been devoured—that is, consumed—the marriage with Susanoo is productive insofar as it will bring forth children. According to Miura, this forms the core of the “culture” brought by Susanoo. “Viewed in this light, the various characteristics of Susanoo depicted in the serpent-slaying myth symbolize ‘culture’ that brings a new order.”<sup>22</sup> This interpretation firmly situates the tale in the agricultural context of wet-rice cultivation.

## The Dragon’s Connection to Water

Often the eight-headed serpent is not only seen as a river god as in Miura’s interpretation but rather as a personification of the Hi (*Kojiki*: 肥; *Nihon shoki*: 鯪) River (present-day Hii 斐伊 River), the largest river in the Izumo region, which features prominently in most versions of the myth.<sup>23</sup> This is not surprising if one pays

attention to the description of the serpent’s appearance, which is indeed reminiscent of a mighty river:

Its eyes are like red cherries and it has eight heads and eight tails. Covered in moss, cypress and cedar, it spans eight valleys and eight peaks, and when you look at its belly you see blood oozing out everywhere.<sup>24</sup>

The Hi River frequently burst its banks until its course was redirected during the Edo period (1600–1868). On the other hand, the river’s nourishing waters were an indispensable prerequisite for any form of agriculture, especially for the irrigation of rice paddies. The river’s significance for those who lived in its vicinity can be inferred from a passage in the *Izumo fudoki* 出雲風土記 (Topography of Izumo, 733):

On both sides of the river, the soil is fertile. In some places, prosperous fields provide the people with abundant harvests of the five sorts of grain, mulberry, and hemp. In other places, the soil is fertile and herbs and trees grow profusely. There are *ayu* 年魚 [sweetfish], salmon, trout, dace, mullet, and sea eel. They crowd the deep and shallow waters. The people of the five districts between the mouth of the river and the headwaters at the village of Yokota 横田 live off the river.<sup>25</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that the local farmers, who depended on the river for their livelihood, regarded it not only with awe but also with fear. Like the eight-headed serpent, the river brought both fertility and destruction.

The dragon’s close connection to rivers and water is by no means limited to Japan. The Egyptologist Grafton Elliot Smith, for instance, regarded “the control of water” as the “fundamental element in the dragon’s powers.” This control extends over both the “beneficent and destructive aspects [of] water” and includes the regulation of tides, streams, and rainfall. Moreover, dragons were believed to dwell in pools or wells and were associated with thunder and lightning.<sup>26</sup>

21 This name is used only in the *Nihon shoki*; in the *Kojiki*, the young woman is called Kushiinada-hime 寄名田比売, a name that is not directly relatable to rice fields. However, Matsumura Takeo argues that this name resulted via elision from the one used in the *Nihon shoki*. Matsumura, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū*, vol. 3, pp. 207–208.

22 Miura, *Kojiki kōgi*, pp. 122–26. I am indebted to Robert Wittkamp for pointing out this reference to me.

23 See, for instance, Aston, *Shinto*, p. 105; Matsumoto, *Kojiki shinwa ron*, p. 69; Matsumura, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū*, vol. 3, pp. 188–89; Saigō, *Kojiki no sekai*, pp. 73–75. All versions of the serpent-slaying myth are set beside a river. Only variant 2 of the *Nihon shoki* provides a name different from Hi River in this context, namely the E 可愛 River in Agi (the western part of present-day Hiroshima Prefecture). Yet even this variant mentions the Hi River in Izumo as the site where Susanoo finally settled down with his bride.

24 Heldt, *The Kojiki*, p. 26.

25 *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 218–19.

26 Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*, p. 78. Robert Miller discusses a large number of Near Eastern variants of the dragon-slaying myth, in most of which the dragon is explicitly associated with rivers or the sea. Miller, “Tracking the Dragon.”

How can the dragon's connection to water be reconciled with the conception of it being an embodiment of chaos? A look at Greek mythology provides a possible answer to this question. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth century BCE), Chaos is the first deity that comes into being. The goddess is depicted as one of the two primordial mothers—the other being Gaia, that is, Mother Earth.<sup>27</sup> Several Greek philosophers therefore identified Chaos with water. Possibly this conception can be traced back to a time when the ocean formed the limit of the world known to humankind, an insurmountable barrier hostile to human life. “Hence Chaos—a living state of disorder, inactivity, and preëxistent death—was conceived as a waste of waters.”<sup>28</sup> Calvert Watkins, on the other hand, interprets the Indo-Iranian theme of the pent-up waters or “the blockage of life-giving forces, which are released by the victorious act of the hero,” discussed below, as a manifestation of the chaos symbolized by the dragon.<sup>29</sup>

While it is difficult to assess whether these interpretations are correct, the dragon's connection to water is indisputably a very pronounced feature in a large number of myths and folktales and can thus justifiably be called a universal motif. Marinus Willem de Visser has amply documented this motif in the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese traditions. He demonstrated that the Indian nagas, “serpent-shaped semi-divine kings, living in great luxury in their magnificent palaces at the bottom of the water,” share their role as givers or withholders of rain with Chinese and Japanese dragons.<sup>30</sup>

Of special importance in this context is the *jiao long* 蛟龍, a type of dragon that is attested to in the myths and folklore of central and southern China. The *jiao long* is variously described as a “four-legged snake,” “hornless dragon,” or as “a snake with a tiger head, [which] is several fathoms long, lives in brooks and rivers, and bellows like a bull”; it has to be distinguished from the “real dragon” (*long* 龍), “which can ascend to heaven, is mainly benevolent, and provides rain and fertility.” The *jiao* dragon, in contrast, “is usually malevolent and dangerous for man.... [It] is a special form of the snake as river god.”<sup>31</sup> Nelly Naumann emphasizes the relatedness of Chinese *jiao* dragons to Japanese conceptions

of malevolent snakes that inhabit rivers or ponds and that feature in local flood legends.<sup>32</sup> These conceptions doubtless colored the description of the eight-headed serpent in the ancient Japanese court chronicles. The conception of the dragon as a water god who must be propitiated in order to ensure sufficient water supply for agriculture and to prevent floods seems to form the oldest layer of the dragon-slayer myth. In Japan this theme finds a specific expression in the eight-headed serpent's close connection to wet-rice cultivation.

## Perseus and Andromeda

The parallels of the “Slaying of the Great Eight-Headed Serpent” with dragon-slayer myths around the globe have not gone unnoticed in previous scholarship. As early as 1896, W. G. Aston emphasized “the resemblance of this story to that of Perseus and Andromeda, and many others.”<sup>33</sup> In the same year, Edwin Sydney Hartland included a discussion of the Japanese myth in the last volume of his influential study *The Legend of Perseus*.<sup>34</sup> Since that time scholars inside and outside Japan have frequently compared the myth of Susanoo slaying the eight-headed serpent with the Greek narrative of Perseus and Andromeda.<sup>35</sup> The Greek narrative can be summarized thus: Andromeda was the daughter of Queen Cassiopeia who had unwisely boasted that she was fairer than the sea nymphs. To punish this sacrilege, Poseidon sent a flood and a sea monster to eradicate Cassiopeia's kingdom. According to an oracle, this disaster could only be avoided if Andromeda was sacrificed to the monster. Hence, the princess was chained to a rock at the shore, where Perseus, a son of Zeus, found her. The youth killed the monster and took

27 Caldwell, *Hesiod's Theogony*, p. 3.

28 Fontenrose, *Python*, pp. 225, 238–39.

29 Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, p. 300.

30 Visser, *Dragon in China and Japan*, p. 231.

31 Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, pp. 378–79.

32 Naumann, “Yama no Kami,” p. 89. Naumann has demonstrated the presence of a number of elements associated with the southern Chinese Yue 越 culture in the material and spiritual culture of Izumo. Naumann, *Umwandeln des Himmelspeilers*, pp. 218–29.

33 Aston, *Nihongi*, vol. 1, p. 53, note 4.

34 Hartland, *Legend of Perseus*, vol. 3, pp. 51–53.

35 See, for example, Fontenrose, *Python*, p. 500; Lyle, “Hero,” p. 6; Matsumae, *Nihon shinwa no keisei*, pp. 195–97; Matsumoto, *Kojiki shinwa ron*, pp. 68–69; Matsumura, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū*, vol. 3, pp. 166–69; Miura, *Kojiki kōgi*, p. 116; Ōbayashi, *Nihon shinwa no kigen*, pp. 166–70; Philippi, *Kojiki*, p. 406; Seki, “Yamata no orochi,” pp. 164–65; Yamaguchi, *Tsukurareta Susanoo shinwa*, pp. 133–59.



Andromeda as his wife.<sup>36</sup>

The structural parallels to the *yamata no orochi* myth are apparent: in both cases, a girl is to be sacrificed to a water dragon; she is rescued by a hero from abroad, and becomes his wife. While the dragon in the Greek tale is explicitly connected with a flood, a similar connection is at least implied in the Japanese tale if we accept the identification of the eight-headed serpent with the Hi River bursting its banks each spring.<sup>37</sup> It must be emphasized, however, that the Greek tale differs from the *yamata no orochi* myth insofar as it is not linked to agriculture.

## Releasing the Waters

Michael Witzel challenges the view that the “Slaying of the Great Eight-Headed Serpent” belongs to the same type of narratives as the myth of Perseus and Andromeda by drawing attention to another group of myths that are also concerned with dragons and water, albeit in a different way: instead of a flood, they deal with a drought. In a massive work on the origins of the world’s mythologies, Witzel endeavors to reconstruct a basic storyline that is common to most of the world’s mythologies.<sup>38</sup> In this storyline, he assigns an important position to the slaying of the dragon: after the creation of the universe, he argues, the earth has to be moistened so it can nurture living beings. In many traditions it is not ordinary water but the blood of a primordial dragon that fertilizes the earth. He explicitly mentions the *yamata no orochi* myth as an articulation of this mythical idea.<sup>39</sup>

In a recent article, Emily Lyle draws on Witzel’s work but remarks that in the Japanese myth “aspects of the ‘release of the waters’ and the ‘prevention of flood’ are found together.”<sup>40</sup> According to Lyle, this is no coincidence, since both aspects can be traced to the same narrative framework, namely the “world-shaping process” in which the dragon-slayer has to fight off “a number of extreme conditions,” among them the situations “too dry” and “too wet.”<sup>41</sup>

In the *yamata no orochi* myth the two episodes are connected by the sword Kusanagi that Susanoo extracts from the serpent’s tail. This sword, Lyle argues, is in fact the sky god’s phallus that “is left embedded in the primal goddess” after the separation of sky and earth.<sup>42</sup>

This interpretation becomes comprehensible if one considers the cosmogony described in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. The Greek work relates how Gaia mated with her son Ouranos, the first sky god, who imprisoned their children in Gaia’s body. Eventually Gaia could not bear the pain and therefore made a sickle for her sons to punish their father. Kronos, the youngest, took the sickle and castrated his father. A number of children were born from the sky god’s blood that fell on the earth, and his severed phallus was transformed into the goddess Aphrodite.<sup>43</sup>

While the castration motif is characteristic first of all of Near Eastern mythologies,<sup>44</sup> the idea of the sexual embrace of sky and earth that had to be broken at the beginning of time is widely distributed over the globe.<sup>45</sup> The *Nihon shoki*, too, opens with the separation of heaven and earth:

In ancient times, heaven and earth were not yet separated; the female and the male principles were not yet divided. They formed a chaotic mass like a hen’s egg which was dark and hard to discern and contained germs. The clear and bright [parts] expanded thinly and became the heaven, the heavy and murky [parts] lingered and became the earth. The pure and fine parts easily merged, while the coagulation of the dark and murky parts

36 Ingersoll, *Dragons and Dragon Lore*, pp. 124–25.

37 Hartland suggested a similar interpretation for the Greek myth: “It may, of course, be that the monster sent to devour Andromeda is to be regarded simply as the personification of water, or of specific rivers in their sinister aspect.” Hartland, *Legend of Perseus*, vol. 3, p. 94. Hartland’s view, in turn, inspired Aston’s interpretation of the Japanese myth. Aston, *Nihongi*, vol. 1, pp. 104–105.

38 Witzel, *Origins*. It goes without saying that Witzel’s undertaking is not only an ambitious but also a controversial one. A discussion of his methodology is well beyond the scope of this article. Although the study draws attention to astounding parallels in the structures of mythologies widely dispersed in time and space, Witzel’s inattention to the textual genesis of the individual sources under consideration is a serious drawback and his conclusions should therefore be questioned. For a critical assessment of his work, see Lincoln, “Review.”

39 Witzel, “Slaying the Dragon,” pp. 266–67.

40 Lyle, “Hero,” p. 6.

41 Lyle, *Ten Gods*, pp. 106–107.

42 Lyle, “Hero,” p. 7.

43 Caldwell, *Hesiod’s Theogony*, pp. 6–7.

44 Mondl, “Greek Mythic Thought,” pp. 155–56.

45 Witzel, *Origins*, pp. 128–37. This is also true for Korean mythology. See Hyōn, “Nihon shinwa to Kankoku shinwa,” pp. 70–80; Yoda, *Chōsen no ōken*, pp. 5–11.

was completed with [greater] difficulty. Therefore, the heaven came into being first and the earth was formed afterward. Thereafter, divine beings (*shinsei* 神聖) were born between them.<sup>46</sup> . . . At this time, one thing was born between heaven and earth. Its form was like that of a reed shoot. Then it became a deity and was called Kuninotokotachi no Mikoto 国常立尊 (Eternally Standing Deity of Earth).<sup>47</sup>

The *Kojiki* frames the origin of the world somewhat differently. Here heaven and earth are not separated but “first became active.”<sup>48</sup> Afterwards a deity called Amenotokotachi no Kami 天之常立神 (Eternally Standing Deity of Heaven) comes into being.<sup>49</sup> In this context, Witzel regards Amenotokotachi no Kami as “the prop supporting heaven and separating heaven and earth.” As he shows, such props or pillars appear in a number of mythologies in different regions of the world. This may suggest that the separation of heaven and earth was conceived as a violent act.<sup>50</sup>

This phenomenon throughout world mythology shows that it is possible to compare the Japanese account of the separation of heaven and earth, at least in its broad outline, with the separation of Ouranos from Gaia as related by Hesiod. Therefore, Lyle’s interpretation of Kusanagi as the sky god’s phallus is not impossible, although it admittedly remains speculative. The merit of her hypothesis is that it allows us to overcome one of the greatest contradictions in the myth of Susanoo’s fight against the eight-headed serpent. As discussed later in this article, the magical weapon is a typical feature of dragon-slayer myths the world over. In many tales, this weapon—often an iron sword—is needed to defeat the dragon. Why then does Susanoo

obtain the mighty sword Kusanagi only *after* he has killed the eight-headed serpent? And how did he come by the sword he used to kill the eight-headed serpent in the first place? If we follow Lyle’s interpretation, this contradiction emerged when two episodes of the narrative sequence associated with the “world-shaping process” were fused into one. In the first of these episodes, she argues, the hero plucks out the sky god’s phallus, which was left embedded in the earth goddess when the sky was separated from the earth. Thereby he gains a powerful weapon and releases the life-giving waters, whose flow was obstructed by the weapon/phallus. In the second episode, he “uses his weapon to defeat the sea dragon” and thus to prevent a flood.<sup>51</sup>

## The Dragon’s Connection to Metal

The sword Kusanagi brings us to another important aspect of the cluster of ideas and motifs centering on the dragon, namely its connection to metal. While this theme is not as widely distributed as the dragon’s association with water, many traditions, especially in Asia, connect the dragon with metal. This connection is an ambivalent one: dragons are believed to dislike iron and can be defeated only with the help of special (often iron) weapons, yet at the same time they guard treasures of gold and can even transform themselves into money or swords.

In his aforementioned study, Smith observes that “throughout the greater part of the area which tradition has peopled with dragons, iron is regarded as peculiarly lethal to the monsters.”<sup>52</sup> Visser provides rich documentation for this belief in China, where dragons were commonly believed to be afraid of iron. This conception is expressed, for example, in a tale about the repairs of a dike that could be completed only after great quantities of iron were buried under the dike and the dragons dwelling in the water were thus defeated, or in the belief that one could cause rains by throwing iron into ponds, thus stirring up the dragons. The latter practice was imported to Japan as well.<sup>53</sup>

The idea that serpents can be killed with iron is attested by a Japanese folktale in which a farmer’s daugh-

46 The *Nihon shoki*’s compilers created this passage by combining sections from Chinese works like the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Master Huainan, second century BCE) and the *Sanwu liji* 三五曆紀 (Historical Records of the Three Sovereign Divinities and the Five Gods, third century CE). See Kōnoshi, *Kojiki to Nihon shoki*, pp. 116–20. Witzel points out that this might in fact only be a matter of wording. Even if the ideas expressed in this cosmogonic myth were already known in the Japanese islands prior to the arrival of the Chinese yin and yang concept, the Chinese-educated compilers of the *Nihon shoki* would have had to look for Chinese models in order to express it in Chinese writing. Witzel, *Origins*, pp. 125–26.

47 *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 18–19.

48 This translation follows Quiros, “Chapter 1,” p. 306.

49 *Kojiki*, pp. 28–29.

50 Witzel, *Origins*, pp. 131–37.

51 Lyle, “Hero,” p. 7.

52 Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*, p. 135.

53 Visser, *Dragon in China and Japan*, p. 67; Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, p. 376.



ter prevents herself from being married off to a serpent by throwing a needle at it, thus killing the beast.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, the *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記 (Records of Miracles of Manifest Retribution of Good and Evil in the Land of Japan, ninth century) relates that a farmer was surprised by a rainstorm while he was working in his rice fields. He took shelter under a tree, holding a metal rod (*kanazue* 金杖) in his hand.

When it thundered, he raised the rod in fear. At that moment the thunder struck in front of him in the form of a child, who made a deep bow. The farmer was about to strike it with the metal rod when the child said, "Please don't hit me. I will repay your kindness."<sup>55</sup>

As a reward for not killing him, the child, who was in fact a thunder god, gifted the farmer with a son of supernatural strength. The text notes that the baby had a snake coiled around his head.<sup>56</sup> This may be taken as a hint of the child's connection to the thunder god and the latter's reptile nature. According to one interpretation, the child is a reincarnation of the deity himself.<sup>57</sup> What is important in the present context is the underlying assumption that the thunder god was afraid of the farmer's metal rod, a tool that was believed to ward off water gods, dragons, or serpents in Japanese folk belief.<sup>58</sup>

There is another side to the dragon's connection with metal, however. Often dragons are believed to guard treasures of gold, a concept that is known in India and East Asia, although the most famous exam-

ples belong to European traditions.<sup>59</sup> In Korea, dragons were believed to inhabit mines and guard their metals jealously.<sup>60</sup> Dragons can even turn themselves into metal. According to a Chinese folktale, a man finds a pot full of gold. When another man steals the pot, he finds only snakes inside. In revenge, he pours the pot's contents through the rightful owner's roof, where the snakes retransform into gold. In a variant, the gold turns into water, supporting the interpretation of dragons or serpents as water gods or even embodiments of water.<sup>61</sup> The connection of serpents to treasures can also be observed in a number of Buddhist tales, where the snake is turned into a symbol of the attachment to earthly riches.<sup>62</sup>

Wolfram Eberhard has pointed to the centrality of the *jiao* dragons in this context. He has shown that they, like snakes in general, are not only defeated by iron, but actually *embody* metal.<sup>63</sup> As already noted, these ideas, which form a part of the southern Chinese snake cult, can be traced in the myths of Izumo as well. An analysis of the "Slaying of the Eight-Headed Serpent" has to take this cultural background into account. There is no need for an elaborate explanation that regards the sword Kusanagi as the phallus of the sky god, as suggested by Lyle, if Japanese and Chinese tales suggest a simpler interpretation, namely that the sword is an alternate form of the serpent itself.

According to Visser, Chinese dragons can "transform themselves into old men, beautiful women, and fishes, or sometimes assume the shapes of trees and objects, as e. g. swords."<sup>64</sup> A southern Chinese tale may serve as an example: A man found two carp that suddenly turned into iron. He made two swords out of them that were sharp enough to cut through rocks. With these swords, the man established himself as a king. As Eberhard points out, these carp are nothing else than transformed *jiao* dragons.<sup>65</sup>

As mentioned above, Susanoo found the sword Kusanagi in the eight-headed serpent's tail. This might

54 Ikeda 312B, *Type and Motif Index*, pp. 74–75; Seki, "Yamata no orochi," pp. 150–52. Another related tale type that is attested to in southern Korea and Japan is that of the "Snake Paramour," in which a young woman is visited every night by a stranger. She uses a needle to attach a thread to his clothes. When next morning she follows the thread, she finds that her lover is actually a serpent. In *Kojiki*, pp. 184–88, this motif is associated with the deity of Miwa, who appears in serpent form in another passage in the *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 282–84. This tale does not belong to the dragon-slayer type; however, it does imply a connection between serpent and metal, since the iron needle is an important motif in all versions. See also Antoni, *Miwa*, pp. 91–97; Yoda, *Chōsen minzoku bunka*, pp. 26–28; Ikeda 411C, *Type and Motif Index*, p. 103. Ikeda mentions Japanese versions in which the snake husband is killed with an iron needle. Ibid.

55 Nakamura, *Miraculous Stories*, pp. 105–106.

56 *Nihon ryōiki* 1:3 (pp. 204–205).

57 Kelsey, "Salvation of the Snake," p. 92.

58 Ouwehand, *Namazu-e*, pp. 176–77.

59 Blust, "Origin of Dragons," p. 520.

60 Ingersoll, *Dragons and Dragon Lore*, p. 88.

61 Eberhard, *Typen chinesischer Volksmärchen*, pp. 229–30;

Eberhard, *Volksmärchen aus Südost-China*, pp. 201–202.

62 Kelsey, "Salvation of the Snake," pp. 101–102.

63 Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, p. 378.

64 Visser, *Dragon in China and Japan*, p. 233, my emphasis.

65 Eberhard, *Local Cultures*, pp. 376–78. For another southern Chinese example of a snake deity turning into a sword, see Eberhard, *Volksmärchen aus Südost-China*, pp. 181–82.

reflect an ancient folk belief that figures in the oral traditions of many regions of Japan. According to this belief, potholes (smooth cavities or holes that form in the rocks of riverbeds through erosion) were in fact drilled by dragons ascending to heaven with the sharp swords growing from their tails.<sup>66</sup>

Roy Andrew Miller and Nelly Naumann draw a connection between the word *kusanagi* and Korean *kurŏng'i* 구렁이 (a serpent, a large snake). They reconstruct the Old Korean form *\*kusinki*, “which was then borrowed into Old Japanese to appear there as *kusanagi*.” Yet they admit that one link is missing to make this etymology “fully convincing.”<sup>67</sup> Considering the evidence presented in this section, it seems not at all implausible that the sword as a *pars pro toto* is named after the serpent from whose tail it emerged.<sup>68</sup>

A close connection between serpent and sword is also suggested by an alternate name for the sword that is mentioned in the *Nihon shoki*:

According to one writing, the original name [of the sword Kusanagi] was Amanomura-kumo no Tsurugi 天叢雲劍 (Sword of the Gathering Clouds of Heaven). Perhaps it came by this name because there were always clouds and mist over the place where the serpent was.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, the sword, like the serpent itself, is associated with clouds and rain. This makes it even more likely that the sword was perceived as a part of the serpent's body.

Ingersoll emphasized the contradictory roles played by the deities mentioned in Egyptian and Babylonian myth: they were, he claimed, “dragon, dragon-slayer and the weapon employed, all in the same personage.”<sup>70</sup> The above entitles us at least to assert a close relationship between serpent and sword in the Japanese tradition.

## The Yamata no Orochi Myth and its Connection to Metallurgy

Many scholars have associated the myth of Susanoo's fight against the eight-headed serpent with the arrival of advanced techniques of metalworking from the Korean Peninsula. In this context, rationalizing and euhemeristic interpretations abound, especially in Japanese scholarship. A scholar might claim, for instance, that the serpent's red eyes symbolized smelting furnaces, and that the serpent's blood that turned the river red, as we are told in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, was actually nothing else than red-hot iron.<sup>71</sup> In such interpretations, Susanoo is usually regarded as the ancestral deity or the leader of a group of metalworkers, often of Korean descent.<sup>72</sup> One scholar viewed the eight-headed serpent as a mountain spirit that was fond of causing rainstorms and deluges. The ensuing landslides, he argued, brought rich deposits of iron sand to the surface that were, in turn, made into swords. Hence, swords made of iron taken from the bowels of the mountain came to be viewed as parts of the tail of the mountain spirit in its serpent form.<sup>73</sup> Euhemeristic overtones can also be perceived in an otherwise highly readable recent study by James Grayson, who maintains that Susanoo “became the [Izumo] region's ruler because he is the bearer of an advanced culture, the metallurgic and agricultural civilization of continental East Asia.”<sup>74</sup>

The fundamental problem with such interpretations is that they regard myths as nothing more than “the allegorical representation of actual historical events and persons,”<sup>75</sup> thereby missing most of the various layers of meaning that constitute myth. A narrative that has undergone a complex development and was adapted to changing social, economic, and cultural circumstances is thus turned into an embroidered account of a specific historical event, in this case the introduction of metallurgical techniques by a group of immigrants. It seems much more likely that the introduction of metalworking techniques added a new layer of meaning to a preexisting narrative. It seems plausible that by incorporating the discovery of the mighty sword Ku-

66 Matsumura, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū*, vol. 3, p. 240; Takioto, *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, pp. 102–103.

67 Naumann and Miller, “Old Japanese Sword Names,” pp. 405–406.

68 Cf. Naumann, “The ‘Kusanagi’ Sword,” pp. 163–64.

69 *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 92–93.

70 Ingersoll, *Dragons and Dragon Lore*, p. 26.

71 Yoshino, *Fudoki sekai*, p. 322.

72 See, for instance, Mizuno, *Kodai no Izumo*, pp. 198–99; Yoshino, “Susan tesshinron,” p. 237.

73 Katō, “Yamata no orochi shinwa,” pp. 283–85.

74 Grayson, “Susa-no-o,” pp. 482–83.

75 Burns, *Before the Nation*, p. 48.

sanagi, the Japanese dragon-slayer myth adapted to the introduction of a new cultural technology that was connected to two aspects already addressed in the narrative: water and agriculture. As will be elaborated below, in ancient Japan iron sand for the production of iron utensils was obtained from the bottoms of rivers; and it goes without saying that the increased availability of iron tools from the early Kofun period revolutionized agriculture. I would therefore argue that it was natural for a myth preoccupied with the importance of rivers and agriculture such as the “Slaying of the Great Eight-Headed Serpent” to incorporate the new technological innovation and thus remain relevant in a new age. Of course it is equally possible that metallurgical ideas were already a part of the narrative when it was first introduced to Japan from the Asian mainland. While the agricultural and the metallurgical layers of meaning are relatively easy to discern in the *yamata no orochi* myth as it is related in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact location or timeframe of their emergence.

Rationalizing and euhemeristic approaches also fail to account for the existence of strikingly similar tales in different cultures. Ōbayashi Taryō, on the other hand, compares the Japanese myth with tales of the Perseus–Andromeda type told among the Gilyak (Nivkh) of Sakhalin and the Ainu as well as with similar tales from Korea, Mongolia, southern and central China, Indochina, Borneo, and the Philippines. From this comparison, he concludes that in most regions, motifs connected with swords play an important role in the narrative. More specifically, he observes the following motifs and notions: (1) a human sacrifice is necessary to obtain a magical sword (Japan, China, Indochina, Mindanao); (2) a magical sword is obtained inside a mountain or under the earth (Japan, Korea, China, Mindanao); (3) a magical sword is discovered in a body of water (Japan, China, Indochina); and (4) sword and dragon or serpent are closely connected (Japan, Korea, China, Indochina).<sup>76</sup>

The centrality of the sword, Ōbayashi argues, suggests that these tales originated in societies that possessed advanced knowledge of metallurgy. He points out that in works dating to the Later Han period (25 CE–220 CE), like *Wu Yue chun qiu* 吳越春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue) or *Yue jue shu*

越絕書 (A History of the Glory and Fall of Yue), the southern kingdoms of Wu 吳 and Yue 越 were famed throughout China for their supreme swords. According to Ōbayashi, the tales from this region show the most striking similarities to the Japanese myth of the eight-headed serpent. The Indochinese tales, on the other hand, are associated with Dongson culture, the first metal-producing culture of Indochina and Indonesia that entered the region from the north around 800 BCE.<sup>77</sup>

Ōbayashi argues that these diverse manifestations of metal culture were not unrelated to each other. He draws attention to the close parallels between Asian and European versions of the dragon-slayer myth and concludes that the tales can be traced back to a common origin. Situating the diffusion of metallurgic techniques and the myths of the Perseus–Andromeda type in the framework of Robert Heine-Geldern’s (1885–1968) so-called Pontic Migration (*Pontische Wanderung*),<sup>78</sup> he argues that they were carried from the Pontic area to East and Southeast Asia in the first half of the first millennium BCE and were finally transmitted to Japan from the area to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangzi River, possibly via southern Korea.<sup>79</sup> The folklorist Seki Keigo similarly argues that the Korean Peninsula functioned as a mediator in transmitting the dragon-slayer myth from China to the archipelago. Like Ōbayashi, he emphasizes the southern route of transmission of the myth, focusing on variants from Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, India, and Turkey.<sup>80</sup>

In a more recent study, Yamaguchi Hiroshi draws attention to the heroic epics of northern Eurasia, in many of which the hero has to fight a many-headed monster. He raises examples from the Ukraine, Russia, southern Siberia, Mongolia, and China that show remarkable parallels to the Japanese myth of Susanoo’s fight with

77 Ibid., pp. 169, 189–90; Villiers, *Südostasien vor der Kolonialzeit*, p. 32.

78 According to Heine-Geldern, elements of European and Caucasian cultures were transmitted to Mongolia, China, and Indochina in the context of mass migrations during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, where they gave the impetus for the emergence of Dongson culture. He bases his conclusions on typological comparisons of a number of archaeological artifacts. See Heine-Geldern, “Das Tocharerproblem,” pp. 237–38. On Heine-Geldern’s methodology, see Kaneko, “Robert von Heine-Geldern.”

79 Ōbayashi, *Nihon shinwa no kigen*, pp. 191–95.

80 Seki, “Yamata no orochi,” p. 196 and *passim*.

76 Ōbayashi, *Nihon shinwa no kigen*, pp. 170–93.

the eight-headed serpent.<sup>81</sup>

One such example is the legend of Geser, which is told in a number of different versions in southern Siberia, Mongolia, and Tibet. One of the most important feats of Geser is his fight against a many-headed monster that had abducted one of his wives. In the oldest extant version of the epic—a woodblock print that was produced in Beijing in 1716 in the Mongolian language—the monster is described as a twelve-headed *mangus* 蟒古斯.<sup>82</sup> This term connotes a monster resembling a dragon or a giant serpent. It combines Indian, Iranian, and Buddhist notions of demons that merged in the course of centuries.<sup>83</sup>

Geser defeated the monster and cut off its heads, one after the other. When he had already cut off eleven heads, the *mangus* begged him to spare his life. Geser hesitated, but his allies warned him that the monster's body would soon turn into cast iron, making it impossible for Geser to kill it. This warning proved true: when Geser tried to separate the last head, his sword could not penetrate the monster's throat; neither could his blade penetrate the beast's armpit. When Geser finally managed to cut open its abdomen, liquid ore gushed out and he was able to cut off the last head.<sup>84</sup>

The similarity to the Japanese myth, where Susanoo's sword broke (*Kojiki*) or was blunted (*Nihon shoki*), when the god tried to cut off one of the tails of the eight-headed serpent, is striking. Significantly, it is inside the serpent's tail that Susanoo finds the sword Kusanagi. Yamaguchi draws attention to this parallel and argues that the soul of the eight-headed serpent was transformed into an indestructible iron sword, like the soul of the *mangus* that turned into the material for such a sword.<sup>85</sup>

Other traces suggest a connection of the Geser epic with metallurgy. The Tibetan versions of the tale, for example, relate that Geser (here called Gesar) worked as a blacksmith's apprentice before setting out to retrieve

his wife. As Siegbert Hummel has pointed out, this is only one of a number of motifs in the epic of Geser that show parallels to the tale of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*. This leads Hummel to hypothesize that motifs from Germanic myth might have traveled to Tibet in the course of the Pontic Migration mentioned above.<sup>86</sup>

It seems somewhat rash to postulate the occurrence of a full-scale *Völkerwanderung* from the west to the east of the Eurasian continent based solely on the results of typological comparisons of a very limited number of artifacts. Nonetheless Heine-Geldern's hypothesis accords surprisingly well with the distribution of the dragon-slayer tale across Eurasia. The prominent role played by iron swords in many of these tales suggests a close connection to metallurgy. Yet the diffusion of ideas and cultural techniques does not necessarily require mass migration. Trade and plundering are only two alternative explanations. As we have seen, however, there is strong evidence that metallurgy, including its representation in myth, was transmitted from the area around the Black Sea to Southeast and East Asia. It can easily be imagined—though hardly proved—that this cultural transmission occurred in several waves and split into several arms, as already suggested by Heine-Geldern.<sup>87</sup>

Some of these arms of transmission might have re-joined at the eastern rim of the Eurasian continent, namely on the Korean Peninsula. Archaeologists point out that two separate traditions of ironworking entered the peninsula at roughly the same time. One was the method of smelting ore in a bloomery furnace and forming products through smithing methods on an anvil. This mode of ironworking was characteristic for peoples in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East, from where it diffused into the Central Asian steppe and was carried to eastern Siberia by Scythians around 700 BCE. The Chinese, in contrast, cast nearly all iron products using huge blast furnaces. Cautioning that as of yet no one has traced the precise routes of transmission of ironworking into and down the penin-

81 Yamaguchi, *Tsukurareta Susanoo shinwa*, pp. 130–47.

82 Heissig, *Geser-Studien*, pp. 4–5; Herrmann, *Kesar-Versionen aus Ladakh*, p. 9; Schmidt, *Die Thaten Bogda Gesser Chan's*, p. 112.

83 Heissig, *Geser-Studien*, p. 230.

84 Schmidt, *Die Thaten Bogda Gesser Chan's*, pp. 155–56.

85 There are further parallels between the two tales: both Geser and Susanoo cut their enemies to pieces in their sleep; and Geser's wife intoxicates two giant spiders that guard the entrance to the *mangus's* lair in the same way that Susanoo intoxicates the great eight-headed serpent. See Nekljudov and Tömörceren, *Mongolische Erzählungen über Geser*, pp. 119–29.

86 Hummel, "Anmerkungen zur Ge-sar-Sage," pp. 524–33.

Geser's dogs Asar and Husar, who assist him in his dangerous quest, are another motif that connects the epic of Geser with European dragon-slayer tales. See Nekljudov and Tömörceren, *Mongolische Erzählungen über Geser*, pp. 123–29. As noted at the beginning of this paper, the assistance of three wonderful dogs forms one of the core motifs of tale type ATU 300 "The Dragon-Slayer."

87 Heine-Geldern, "Das Tocharerproblem," p. 237.

sula, William Farris estimates that by 400 BCE “both the Scythian and Chinese methods were probably available to residents of northern Korea.”<sup>88</sup>

Even if we choose not to adopt Heine-Geldern’s hypothesis with its far-reaching implications, Ōbayashi’s approach to position the dragon-slayer myth in the context of metallurgy is fruitful since it allows us to take archaeological findings into account when trying to trace the route of transmission of the mythic motifs in question. Such an undertaking is hardly possible without the aid of archaeological data, especially considering the fact that most of the tales discussed above were committed to writing at a rather late date. If one were to consider only dragon-slayer tales in written sources older than the Japanese court chronicles, the comparison would basically have to be limited to Chinese tales. A related problem concerns the dearth of dragon-slayer tales from Korea. The Korean folktales discussed by Ōbayashi and Seki differ quite markedly from the myth of Susanoo’s fight with the eight-headed serpent. Although the Korean tales open with a similar situation, namely a girl who is to be sacrificed to a giant serpent (or centipede), in these tales the monster is killed not by a youthful hero but rather by a grateful toad, whom the girl had nourished and cared for. Consequently, there is no marriage and no iron sword involved.<sup>89</sup> Another tale, related in the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms, thirteenth century), not only contains the motif of marriage but also shows striking similarities to the overall structure of the *yamata no orochi* myth. In this legend, Kōt’aji 居陶知, a Silla envoy to the Tang court, is asked for help by an old man, who introduces himself as the god of the West Sea and explains that a young monk had appeared and eaten the livers of his children; now only the old man, his wife, and their last daughter are left. Kōt’aji hides himself and waits for the monk’s reappearance. When he shoots him with an arrow, the monk transforms back to his original shape, a fox, and dies. As a reward, the old man, who is actually a dragon, offers his daughter’s hand to Kōt’aji. The wife-to-be is turned into

a flower, which Kōt’aji carries with him to Tang China.<sup>90</sup> While the structural similarities to the myth of Susanoo’s fight with the eight-headed serpent are unmistakable, it cannot be denied that a core element—the iron sword—is missing altogether, while another one—the dragon—plays a very different role in the Korean tale.

The lack of documented Korean tales comparable to the *yamata no orochi* myth makes it difficult to postulate a transmission of the tale via the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, a number of names mentioned in variants of the Japanese myth in the *Nihon shoki* clearly point towards Korea. Most significantly, the sword Susanoo uses to slay the serpent is called “Serpent’s Korea Blade” (*orochi-no-kara-sai no tsurugi* 蛇韓鋤之劍) in one of the variants.<sup>91</sup> Naumann and Miller draw attention to another passage in the same source that mentions a “supreme blade from Wu” (*kure no masai* 句禮能摩差比)<sup>92</sup> and remark that “*karasaFi* ‘a blade from Korea’ (*kara*) naturally points to a blade of Korean origin just as *kure.nō masafi*, ‘a blade from Wu,’ boasts of its continental origin.”<sup>93</sup> In another variant, the blade is called *orochi no ara-masa* 蛇之龐正.<sup>94</sup> While the translation of this name is contested, the component *ara* has been linked to Ara Kaya 阿那加耶, one of the five Kaya states situated in the southeastern part of the peninsula.<sup>95</sup> Both archaeological evidence and Chinese sources like the *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Records of the Three Kingdoms, third century) suggest that the Kaya Federation was an important center of metal production with close ties to the Japanese islands as early as the Yayoi period.<sup>96</sup> A further variant in the *Nihon shoki* asserts that Susanoo crossed over to Izumo from the Korean kingdom of Silla.<sup>97</sup> If these variants are taken into account and the transmission of the dragon-slayer tale is considered in the context of the arrival of metallurgical techniques on the Japanese archipelago, the lack of Korean written sources can be compensated to a certain degree.

As Michael Como rightly points out,

90 *Samguk yusa*, pp. 258–60; cf. Ōbayashi, *Shinwa to shinwagaku*, pp. 213–17.

91 *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 96–97.

92 *Ibid.*, Suiko 推古 20 (612).1.7 (vol. 2, pp. 566–67).

93 Naumann and Miller, “Old Japanese Sword Names,” p. 411.

94 *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 96–97.

95 Bentley, *Sendai Kuji Hongi*, p. 179, note 17; Yoshino, *Fudoki sekai*, p. 322.

96 Seyock, *Spuren der Ostbarbaren*.

97 *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 98–99.

88 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, p. 70; Barnes, *State Formation in Japan*, pp. 65–67; Barnes, *Archaeology of East Asia*, p. 269.

89 Ōbayashi, *Nihon shinwa no kigen*, pp. 175–76; Seki, “Yamata no orochi,” p. 150. An English translation of a version of this tale appears as Tale 113 in Grayson, *Myths and Legends from Korea*, pp. 274–76.



continental technologies related to sericulture, medicine, and metalworking were firmly embedded in continental ritual and conceptual frameworks, [thus] their transmission necessitated the simultaneous transmission and adoption of a body of rites and legends that were part of the basic fabric of popular cultic practice in the Chinese empire(s) and in the Korean kingdoms.<sup>98</sup>

In the last part of this paper, I will therefore shift the focus from a narratological analysis of the *yamata no orochi* myth to an examination of metal production in ancient Izumo, the site of the dragon fight. This examination will consider both written and archaeological evidence.

### Metallurgy in Izumo: Evidence from the *Izumo Fudoki*

The *Izumo fudoki* contains a number of passages that allow us to draw a rather clear picture of the locations of iron production sites in Izumo Province during the Nara period (710–794), the period during which both the *Izumo fudoki* and the court chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were completed. The districts of Iishi 飯石 and Nita 仁多 in the hinterlands of the province play a key role in this context.

The section dedicated to Iishi in the topography mentions that iron sand was obtained from the Hata 波多 River and the Iishi River.<sup>99</sup> Historians generally conclude from this entry that iron sand was obtained from the bottoms of rivers in ancient Izumo.<sup>100</sup> The Hata River and township of the same name located in the northeastern part of the district have often been associated with the Hata lineage group 秦氏.<sup>101</sup> The Hata were a group with Chinese roots that left the Korean Peninsula, where they were probably based in Silla, and emigrated to the Japanese archipelago around the turn

of the fifth century. In Japan, they seem to have played a leading role in establishing technologies of sericulture, weaving, irrigation, and, most important in the present context, metalworking.<sup>102</sup>

The most significant center of iron production in Izumo, however, seems to have been located in the neighboring Nita District. This district comprised the four townships of Mitokoro 三処, Fuse 布勢, Misawa 三沢, and Yokota 横田. “The iron obtained in all of the [four] townships mentioned above,” the *Izumo fudoki* relates, “is exceedingly strong. Manifold tools can be produced from it.”<sup>103</sup> This entry becomes even more interesting if one considers that this is the region that serves as the setting for the *yamata no orochi* myth in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*—and thus is the place where the mighty sword Kusanagi was discovered. Strangely, the *Izumo fudoki* does not mention Susanoo’s fight against the eight-headed serpent. Hence, many scholars argue that the narrative was fabricated at the imperial court and is not based on any local tradition.<sup>104</sup>

Nonetheless, the *Izumo fudoki* too contains some entries that suggest a connection of Susanoo to metalworking. The topography, for example, mentions two sons of Susanoo with the telling names Tsurugi-hiko 都留支日子 (Sword Prince) and Tsuki-hoko-tooyoruhiko 衝杵等乎而留比古 (God of the Penetrating Halberd).<sup>105</sup> Moreover, the township of Susa, from which Susanoo, according to one theory, received his name,<sup>106</sup> is situated in Iishi District, one of the centers of iron production in Nara-period Izumo. All in all, the view that Susanoo must have been a deity venerated by a

98 Como, *Weaving and Binding*, p. xii. In contrast to the present paper, Como is interested mainly in the transmission of these technologies and legends to Japan during the Nara and early Heian periods and does not address protohistorical or prehistorical developments.

99 *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 246–49.

100 Katō, *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, p. 400; Uchida, “Kodai Izumo no shio,” p. 235; Yoshino, “Suson tesshinron,” p. 239.

101 See, for example, Lewin, *Aya und Hata*, p. 88; Yoshino, “Suson tesshinron,” pp. 240–41.

102 Como, *Weaving and Binding*, p. 254; Katō, *Hatashi to sono tami*, pp. 109–44; Lewin, *Aya und Hata*, p. 34; Naumann, “Yama no Kami,” pp. 131–33.

103 *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 250–53.

104 Miura draws attention to a passage in the *Izumo fudoki* that casts doubt on this view: the entry on the township of Mori 母理 in Ou 意宇 District relates that Susanoo’s descendant Ōnamochi 大穴持 had subjugated Eight Mouths (*yakuchi* 八口) of Koshi 越. *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 138–40. While Miura does not claim that this passage refers to the *yamata no orochi* myth, he points out that in the *Kojiki* the monster is called the eight-headed serpent of Koshi 高志. *Kojiki*, pp. 68–69. Hence, it is not unreasonable to suggest some sort of connection between the two narratives. Miura, *Kojiki kōgi*, pp. 240–44, 252–53.

105 *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 160–61, 186–87. The interpretation of the latter deity’s name follows Aoki, *Records of Wind and Earth*, p. 110, and Katō, *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, p. 258. The reading and meaning of the name are disputed.

106 See, for example, Aston, *Shinto*, pp. 140–41; Matsumura, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū*, vol. 2, pp. 602–604.



group of metalworkers, probably of Korean descent, who lived in Susa does not seem implausible.<sup>107</sup>

This view is supported by an interesting shrine name reported in the *Izumo fudoki* that points to the Korean origin of metalworkers in Izumo, namely Karakama 韓鉦 Shrine in Izumo District.<sup>108</sup> While the first character of the name refers to the Korean Peninsula, the second means sickle.<sup>109</sup> The shrine is also mentioned in the *Engishiki* 延喜式 (Ritual Procedures of the Engi Era, 928), where the graph 竈 (stove, hearth) is used for *kama*. In the same source, *karakama* 韓竈 (Korean stoves), are mentioned as utensils needed to brew *sake* and cook rice at religious festivals.<sup>110</sup> Both sickles and hearths are linked to metalworking, and the shrine's connection to the peninsula is apparent from its name. For these reasons, the shrine has been associated with groups of metalworkers who emigrated from the Korean Peninsula. The *Un'yōshi* 雲陽誌 (Description of Un'yō [= Izumo], 1717), a topography of the Izumo region compiled by Kurosawa Nagahisa 黒沢長尚 (d. 1737) under the auspices of the lord of Matsue Domain, informs us that Susanoo is the shrine's main deity.<sup>111</sup> There is no way of knowing whether this was already the case at the time of the *Izumo fudoki*'s compilation.

## Archaeological Evidence

It is generally assumed that the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago learned about the use of bronze and iron at about the same time, probably in the fourth or third century BCE.<sup>112</sup> As noted above, Chinese written sources point to the special role played by southern Korea in the transmission of iron implements to the archipelago. It is not known, however, whether the Jap-

anese imported iron ore, raw iron, or finished products from the peninsula.<sup>113</sup> Iron axes and daggers that were probably produced in China and imported via the peninsula have been excavated from Kyushu sites dating from the late centuries BCE.<sup>114</sup>

Local production of bronze and iron products is thought to have begun in northern Kyushu during the middle Yayoi period (ca. 100 BCE–100 CE). During excavations carried out in 1984 and 1985 at Kōjindani 荒神谷 in Shimane Prefecture, archaeologists unearthed an unprecedented number of 358 bronze swords, six bronze bells, and sixteen bronze halberds, all dating from around 100 CE.<sup>115</sup> Since then, Izumo has been regarded as one of the most important cultural centers of Yayoi and Kofun Japan, characterized principally by its advanced skills in metalworking. In 1988, a casting mold dating from around 100 CE was excavated on the Hii plain, suggesting that the bronze objects found at Kōjindani were locally produced in Izumo. The bronze-casting technology probably entered Izumo from Silla.<sup>116</sup>

As noted above, two modes of ironworking were known in early Korea: the Scythian mode of forging iron and the Chinese mode of casting iron. The peninsula's inhabitants seem to have preferred the simpler Scythian method. Ironworkers on the archipelago followed this Korean method rather than the Chinese one, which strongly suggests a transmission of ironworking technologies from the Korean Peninsula.<sup>117</sup>

During the Kofun period, the use and production techniques of iron implements gradually diversified and spread over the Japanese islands. The first half of the fifth century in particular is marked by a dramatic increase in the quantity of iron objects excavated from mounded tombs. During this period, the Chūgoku region (comprising the present-day prefectures of Yamaguchi, Hiroshima, Shimane, Tottori, and Okayama) emerged as a fourth center of iron production beside

107 See Yoshino, "Suson tesshinron," p. 237; Takioto, *Izumo no kuni fudoki*, pp. 61–63.

108 *Izumo fudoki*, pp. 214–15.

109 Takioto, *Kodai no Izumo jiten*, p. 190. According to Murakami Yasuyuki, the crescent-shaped stone blades that were used for the rice harvest during the Yayoi period were replaced in the early Kofun period with iron sickles. Murakami, "Eisenerzeugnisse der Kofun-Zeit," p. 358.

110 *Engishiki*, pp. 46–47, 112–13, 672–73. Alexander Vovin argues that the Middle Japanese word *kama* (cooking pot), which has been demonstrated to be part of the Old Japanese word *kamaNtō* (cooking place, hearth) is a loan from Korean. Vovin, *Koreo-Japonica*, p. 132.

111 *Un'yōshi*, p. 277; cf. Grayson, "Susa-no-o," pp. 469–70.

112 Kidder, *Himiko*, p. 88.

113 Seyock, *Spuren der Ostbarbaren*, pp. 131–32.

114 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, p. 71; Mizoguchi, *Archaeology of Japan*, p. 142; Piggott, *Emergence of Japanese Kingship*, p. 25.

115 Piggott, "Sacral Kingship," p. 46.

116 Mizoguchi, *Archaeology of Japan*, pp. 140–42; Seyock, *Spuren der Ostbarbaren*, p. 152; Piggott, "Sacral Kingship," pp. 48–49.

117 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, pp. 70–72. While granting the possibility that bloomery technology might have been transmitted to the peninsula by nomads of the Northeast Asian steppes, Gina Barnes points out that it is equally possible that peninsular bronze-workers discovered the technology independently. Barnes, *State Formation in Japan*, p. 66.

Kyushu, the Inland Sea region, and the Kinai.<sup>118</sup> As Joan Piggott points out, “iron-working and mastery of new irrigation techniques proceeded together in fifth- and sixth-century Izumo, for cultivators needed iron tools to open the great river plains of eastern Izumo.”<sup>119</sup> The second half of the sixth century saw the emergence of settlements consisting of a number of smithies as well as settlements in which the various stages of production, like smelting, forging, and timber production, were implemented in the Chūgoku and Kinai regions.<sup>120</sup>

This marks the culmination of a centuries-long development, in which the politics on the Korean Peninsula played a decisive role. An influx of Korean-borne goods and services can be observed during the period from the late fourth to the late seventh centuries. Farris ascribes this phenomenon to four causes: (1) trade; (2) the peninsular states’ foreign policies (especially that of Paekche, which donated cultural and technological aid in return for Wa soldiers); (3) plundering by Wa soldiers, and, most importantly, (4) immigration.<sup>121</sup> The substantial waves of immigration during these four centuries can easily be explained by the tumultuous situation on the Korean Peninsula, which was characterized by incessant warfare between the Korean states. This state of affairs lasted until 668, when Silla unified most of the peninsula under its rule. The *Nihon shoki* reports the arrival of numerous refugees from the peninsula during this period; hence it seems natural to ascribe a large proportion of the new ideas and technologies that emerged in Kofun-period Japan to immigrant lineages.<sup>122</sup> As a matter of course, these immigrant groups brought with them not only their expertise but also their own deities and cults.<sup>123</sup> Como draws attention to the concurrency and interdependence of the development of these newly arrived technologies on the archipelago:

It is . . . probably no accident that the developments of crafts such as weaving and metalworking came to permeate the Japanese islands during the same period in which writing, record-keeping,

and rudimentary bureaucratic institutions took root at the Yamato court. By the middle of the sixth century, service groups specializing in these technologies already appear to have been formed across the Japanese islands, so it would hardly be surprising if, as changes in the material culture of Yamato stimulated new modes of production and new forms of social organization, they also played an important role in the development of the cultic and ritual practices.<sup>124</sup>

Against this historical background, it is reasonable to assume that the belief in Susanoo and the myth of his fight with the eight-headed serpent mirrors the advent of a group of metalworkers (perhaps the Hata) from the peninsula. Susanoo’s close connection with Izumo, which was an important center of metal production conveniently located at the Sea of Japan (East Sea), suggests that this group may have settled in this region and initiated Izumo’s impressive development during the Kofun period. Based on the data presented in this paper it is not possible to discern exactly how this group of metalworkers is connected to the metallurgical layer of the *yamata no orochi* myth. Possibly they brought the tale with them. This interpretation makes sense only if the immigrant group’s life environment and everyday life in Izumo was so similar to that on the peninsula that the myth remained significant without major adaptations. In this case the merging of ideas linked to wet-rice cultivation and metallurgy would already have occurred on the continent. Another possibility is that the tale, with no mention of the sword Kusanagi, was told among the farmers inhabiting the Hii plain and acquired its new layer of meaning when the newcomers arrived from the peninsula and turned Izumo into a center of metal production, thus affecting the whole area. In this case the merging of agricultural and metallurgical ideas would mirror the cultural integration of the metalworkers into Izumo society. A last possibility is that the tale of a dragon that troubled rice farmers was transmitted in some other region of Japan and became associated with the metallurgical powerhouse Izumo only in the late seventh or early eighth century, when scribes writing down the imperial chronicles at the Yamato court added the discovery of Kusanagi as a motif in order to explain the origin of one of the imperial re-

118 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, pp. 71–72; Murakami, “Eisenerzeugnisse der Kofun-Zeit.”

119 Piggott, “Sacral Kingship,” p. 56.

120 Murakami, “Eisenerzeugnisse der Kofun-Zeit,” p. 359.

121 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, p. 110.

122 Farris, *Sacred Texts*, pp. 108–109; Lewin, *Aya und Hata*, pp. 1–11; Lewin, *Der koreanische Anteil*, pp. 31–40.

123 Naumann, “Yama no Kami,” p. 175.

124 Como, *Weaving and Binding*, pp. 113–14.

galia. The association of the myth with Izumo would then only mirror the court's perception of Izumo's paramount importance as a center of metallurgical expertise and metal production that had to be linked to the ancestors of the imperial family in order to strengthen the latter's claim to hegemony over the region.

## Conclusion

After relating the myth of Susanoo's fight with the eight-headed serpent to the transmission of metallurgical techniques from the Korean Peninsula, I would like to return to the broader comparative framework discussed in the first part of this article. As noted above, the union and separation of Father Heaven and Mother Earth forms an important motif in many cosmogonies. A shamanist song from Jeju Island relates that heaven and earth separated in olden times. Afterwards, blue dew descended from heaven and black dew streamed from the earth. When the two kinds of dew mixed, all things came into being.<sup>125</sup> This description clearly mirrors human procreation and can thus be seen as a variant of the Father Heaven and Mother Earth theme, although it lacks the motif of a violent separation of the primordial pair. In this way, the idea of a sexual union between heaven and earth found expression in rather different terms according to the cultural and historical contexts. In other words, we are dealing with particular articulations of a universal theme.

I would argue that the advent of metallurgy might well have caused a modification of this theme that also forms the background for the *yamata no orochi* myth. Mircea Eliade has emphasized that meteorites that fell to earth "charged with celestial sanctity" inspired many early cultures with awe. Often Neolithic tools were given names such as "thunderstones," "thunderbolt teeth," or "God's axes" when they were first discovered, since the sites of their discovery were thought to have been struck by a thunderbolt.<sup>126</sup> This concept is also documented in Heian Japan (794–1185), where the

fourth and the sixth of the official court histories—that is, the *Shoku Nihon kōki* 続日本後紀 (Later Chronicles of Japan Continued, 869) and the *Nihon sandai jitsurōku* 日本三代実録 (True History of Three Reigns of Japan, 901)—report the discovery of stone arrowheads and conclude that they must have fallen from the sky during a thunderstorm.<sup>127</sup>

Eliade points to the phallic connotations of the thunderbolt and the tools associated with it: they "cleaved" the earth; they symbolized, in other words, the union between heaven and earth." At the same time, the thunderbolt was "the weapon of the God of Heaven,"<sup>128</sup> as can be seen in the examples of Zeus or Indra.<sup>129</sup> Before the discovery of smelting, meteoritic iron was used in many cultures to produce tools modeled on their stone counterparts. Yet the idea of the heavenly origin of iron often remained relevant even after the discovery of metallurgical techniques.<sup>130</sup> Thus, the dragon's special connection to metal does not contradict but rather reinforces Lyle's interpretation of Kusanagi as the phallus of the sky god.

This is not the only possible explanation of the tale, however. As we have seen, the myth of Susanoo's fight with the eight-headed serpent places special emphasis on the obtaining of the sword Kusanagi, whose significance can be inferred from the fact that it was venerated as one of the imperial regalia. Is it, therefore, not more likely that the obtaining of the sword itself, and thus of iron, is the point of the tale rather than the "releasing of waters"? Eliade has drawn attention to the widespread conception that ores grow in the womb of Mother Earth like embryos. It is the metalworkers' task to assist in their "birth,"<sup>131</sup> a task befitting a deity of metalworkers like Susanoo. Some might object that the eight-headed serpent is commonly associated with the Hi River and *not* with Mother Earth. While this objection poses a problem for Lyle's interpretation, it does not contradict the new one offered here, since, as we have seen, iron sand was obtained from the bottoms of rivers in ancient Izumo. Thus the material for the production of swords could in a very real sense be said to have been extracted

125 Hyōn, "Nihon shinwa to Kankoku shinwa," pp. 71–77; Yoda, *Chōsen no ōken*, pp. 5–7.

126 Eliade, *The Forge*, pp. 19–20. Mircea Eliade has been rightly criticized not only for openly sympathizing with the fascist Iron Guard in the late 1930s but also for his universalistic approach and his sweeping generalizations. Nonetheless, his comparative studies have opened up new perspectives on mythology that should not be rejected out of hand. For a balanced assessment

of Eliade's life and work, see Ellwood, *Politics of Myth*, pp. 79–126.

127 Bleed, "Almost Archaeology," p. 58.

128 Eliade, *The Forge*, p. 21.

129 Lyle, *Ten Gods*, p. 110; Miller, "Tracking the Dragon," p. 226.

130 Eliade, *The Forge*, pp. 21–29.

131 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–42.

from the serpent's tail.<sup>132</sup>

The success of smelting, moreover, was often thought to require a human sacrifice.<sup>133</sup> This idea can, for example, be observed in the famous Chinese story of the smith Gan Jiang 干將 of Wu and his wife Mo Ye 莫邪, who threw herself (or her hair and nails) into the furnace in order to accomplish the casting of two legendary swords that were named after the couple. This story is already mentioned in chronicles from the late centuries BCE.<sup>134</sup> It would be rash, however, to interpret the sacrifice of Kushiinada-hime's sisters in the same way. Both the *Kojiki* and the main version in the *Nihon shoki* state that the eight-headed serpent came to devour one daughter *every year*.<sup>135</sup> This strongly suggests a connection to the seasonal cycle and thus to the tale's agricultural layer that pertains to the cyclical need for fertilizing waters (as well as the fear of floods).

The present analysis has shown that the *yamata no orochi* myth has undergone a long evolutionary process. I regarded the tale as a particular articulation of the universal dragon-slayer myth. Only a comparative analysis that takes material from outside Japan into account can shed light on the question of how this myth was appropriated on the Japanese archipelago. A central assumption underlying the present study is that myths are embedded in the life experiences of the people who transmit them. Therefore, myths can only remain relevant if they adapt to changes in people's everyday lives. At a time when the Hi River was the lifeline not only for wet-rice cultivators but also for metalworkers based in Izumo, the *yamata no orochi* myth had to consider this circumstance and incorporate the new group into its narrative.

Throughout this article, I have talked about myths accreting new layers of meaning without specifying the actors behind this process. Of course myths do not change of their own accord. Somebody has to change them. However, it is impossible to answer who this somebody is. Myths are by definition collective products. Most scholars agree that a story becomes a myth only when it is transmitted within a certain group. In the process, it becomes an anonymous tale that is believed to have been created by the group rather than an individual. Thus it is impossible to identify an in-

dividual author of a myth.<sup>136</sup> The same is true for the transmission process. Although changes to the *yamata no orochi* myth obviously were introduced by individuals, their agency is obscured by the same "process of cultural amnesia."<sup>137</sup> Metalworkers certainly played a role in this process, but there is no way of knowing whether they brought the ready-made tale from their homeland, introduced changes to a preexisting narrative in their new home, or whether farmers in Izumo modified a myth they had inherited from their ancestors in order to accommodate the newcomers. There is only one group of agents in the transmission of the Japanese myths that we can identify with any degree of certainty, namely the courtiers who compiled *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* at the imperial court in Nara. They introduced a new layer of meaning by weaving individual myths into a coherent mythohistory that explained the origin of the imperial family and its mandate to rule over the Japanese islands. Susanoo's offering up of the sword Kusanagi to the sun goddess Amaterasu, the progenitress of the imperial family, can be ascribed to this layer. It is only this last layer that can be addressed by employing the literary-studies approach of Kōnosshi Takamitsu and others; and even this uppermost layer can be grasped only partially since a purely text-immanent analysis cannot account for the restrictions placed on the courtiers by the preexisting tales on which they based their mythohistory.<sup>138</sup> To gain a deeper understanding of Japanese myths and the historical background of their genesis a consideration of non-Japanese material is indispensable. A comparative approach that takes into account both particular and universal aspects of the myths under consideration makes it possible to connect Japanese mythology to the international discourse on mythological studies and situate Japan in the context of world history.

132 Cf. Matsumae, *Nihon shinwa no keisei*, pp. 195–96.

133 Eliade, *The Forge*, pp. 62–70.

134 Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, pp. 221–24.

135 *Kojiki*, pp. 68–69; *Nihon shoki*, vol. 1, pp. 90–91.

136 Csapo, *Theories of Mythology*, p. 134; Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths*, pp. 28–30.

137 Doniger, *Other Peoples' Myths*, p. 29.

138 Matsumoto, *Kojiki shinwa ron*, pp. 11–14, 27, 43, 67.

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