

EXCERPTS FROM HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF WEI (WEI ZHI)

Introduction

Some of the earliest descriptions of Japan appear in Chinese dynastic histories — official documents commissioned by China’s imperial rulers. The *History of the Kingdom of Wei*, from around 297 CE, included an extended account of Japan (called “Wa” by the Chinese) in an appendix chronicling the various “barbarian” peoples on China’s borders. This discussion of early Japanese society and government is particularly noteworthy for its focus on Pimiko (also known as Himiko), the “Queen of Wa.” Since Pimiko does not appear in indigenous Japanese records of the nation’s early history, the identity and the very existence of Pimiko have long been subjects of active debate among historians. It is interesting to note that, although Japanese law today forbids a woman from becoming emperor, there is a long tradition of female rulers in Japan, stretching back to the controversial Pimiko.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

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Excerpts from History of the Kingdom of Wei (Wei Zhi)

The people of Wa [Japan] dwell in the middle of the ocean on the mountainous islands southeast of [the prefecture of] Daifang. They formerly comprised more than one hundred communities. During the Han dynasty, [Wa] envoys appeared at the court; today, thirty of their communities maintain intercourse with us through envoys and scribes. ...

...

In their meetings and in their deportment, there is no distinction between father and son or between men and women. They are fond of liquor. In their worship, men of importance simply clap their hands instead of kneeling or bowing. The people live long, some to one hundred and others to eighty or ninety years. Ordinarily, men of importance have four or five wives; the lesser ones, two or three. Women are not loose in morals or jealous. There is no theft, and litigation is infrequent. In case of violations of the law, the light offender loses his wife and children by confiscation; as for the grave offender, the members of his household and also his kinsmen are exterminated. There are class distinctions among the people, and some men are vassals of others. ...

...

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF WEI (WEI ZHI)**

The country formerly had a man as ruler. For some seventy or eighty years after that there were disturbances and warfare. Thereupon the people agreed upon a woman for their ruler. Her name was Pimiko. She occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people. Though mature in age, she remained unmarried. She had a younger brother who assisted her in ruling the country. After she became the ruler, there were few who saw her. She had one thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink and acted as a medium of communication. She resided in a palace surrounded by towers and stockades, with armed guards in a state of constant vigilance. ...

In the sixth month of the second year of Jingchu [238 C.E.], the Queen of Wa sent the grandee Nashonmi and others to visit the prefecture [of Daifang], where they requested permission to proceed to the Emperor's court with tribute. The Governor, Liu Xia, dispatched an officer to accompany the party to the capital. In answer to the Queen of Wa, an edict of the Emperor, issued in the twelfth month of the same year, said as follows:

Herein we address Pimiko, Queen of Wa, whom we now officially call a friend of Wei. The Governor of Daifang, Liu Xia, has sent a messenger to accompany your vassal, Nashonmi, and his lieutenant, Tsushi Gori. They have arrived here with your tribute, consisting of four male slaves and six female slaves, together with two pieces of cloth with designs, each twenty feet in length. You live very far away across the sea; yet you have sent an embassy with tribute. Your loyalty and filial piety we appreciate exceedingly. We confer upon you, therefore, the title "Queen of Wa Friendly to Wei," together with the decoration of the gold seal with purple ribbon. The latter, properly encased, is to be sent to you through the Governor. We expect you, O Queen, to rule your people in peace and to endeavor to be devoted and obedient. ...

When Pimiko passed away, a great mound was raised, more than a hundred paces in diameter. Over a hundred male and female attendants followed her to the grave. Then a king was placed on the throne, but the people would not obey him. Assassination and murder followed; more than one thousand were thus slain.

A relative of Pimiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was [then] made queen and order was restored. Zheng [the Chinese ambassador] issued a proclamation to the effect that Iyo was the ruler. Then Iyo sent a delegation of twenty under the grandee Yazaku, General of the Imperial Guard, to accompany Zheng home [to China]. The delegation visited the capital and presented thirty male and female slaves. It also offered to the court five thousand white gems and two pieces of carved jade, as well as twenty pieces of brocade with variegated designs.

[Adapted from Tsunoda and Goodrich, Japan in the Chinese Dynastic Histories, pp. 8-16]

Questions:

1. What sense of early Japanese society do you get from this passage? Why do you think the Chinese considered the Japanese “barbarians”?
2. How is Pimiko described in this account?
3. Why might Pimiko have sought a relationship with China? Why would China have been interested in engaging these “barbarians”?
4. How trustworthy would you consider this account? What makes it ring true? What makes it sound suspicious?