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The Nihon Shoki

Ancient Chronicles of Japan

EASTERN TREASURES

The Ancient Chronicles of Japan

THE NIHON SHOKI

(8th century)

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Eastern Treasures Series

THE NIHON SHOKI

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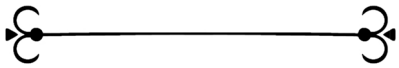
The Nihon Shoki – Ancient Chronicles of Japan



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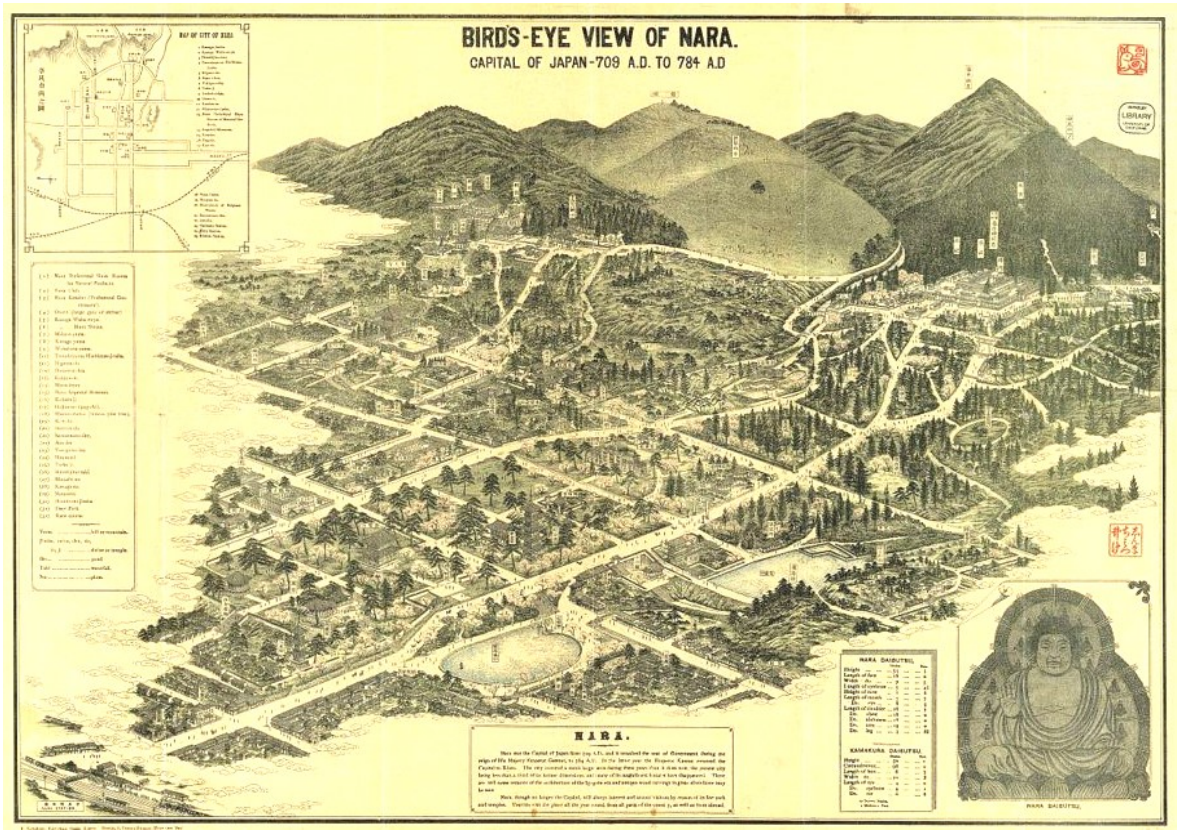
The Translation

The ruins of Emperor Tenmu's Kiyomihara palace in Asuka, located in the present-day village of Asuka, Nara Prefecture — the Asuka Kiyomihara Palace was the Imperial residence and political centre of Japan during the late Asuka period. It was used by Emperor Tenmu and Empress Regnant Jitō from 672 to 694. 'The Nihon Shoki' was overseen by Prince Toneri, a son of Emperor Temmu, alongside a committee of court scholars.



Nara in the eighth century

Asuka village, Nara, today

The Nihon Shoki (720)

Translated by William George Aston, 1896

The second oldest book of classical Japanese history, *The Nihon Shoki* is a more elaborate and detailed text than its predecessor, *The Kojiki*. It is an important tool for historians and archaeologists as it includes the most complete extant historical record of ancient Japan. The original manuscript was completed under the editorial supervision of Prince Toneri, with the assistance of Ō no Yasumaro in 720, when it was presented to Empress Genshō. The text reveals the Chinese influence on Japanese civilisation at the time, when members of the Sinicized court wanted written history that could be compared with the celebrated annals of ancient China. *The Nihon Shoki* was written in classical Chinese, as was common for official documents at that time. *The Kojiki*, on the other hand, was composed in a combination of Chinese and phonetic transcription of Japanese (primarily for names and songs). *The Nihon Shoki* also features numerous transliteration notes, informing the reader how words were pronounced in Japanese.

The text opens with the Japanese creation myth, explaining the origin of the world and the first seven generations of divine beings, continuing with a number of myths. It is composed in a similar vein to *The Kojiki*, though it continues its account through to events of the eighth century. It is believed to record accurately the latter reigns of Emperor Tenji, Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō. *The Nihon Shoki* focuses on the merits of the virtuous rulers as well as the errors of the bad rulers. It describes episodes from mythological eras and diplomatic contacts with other countries.

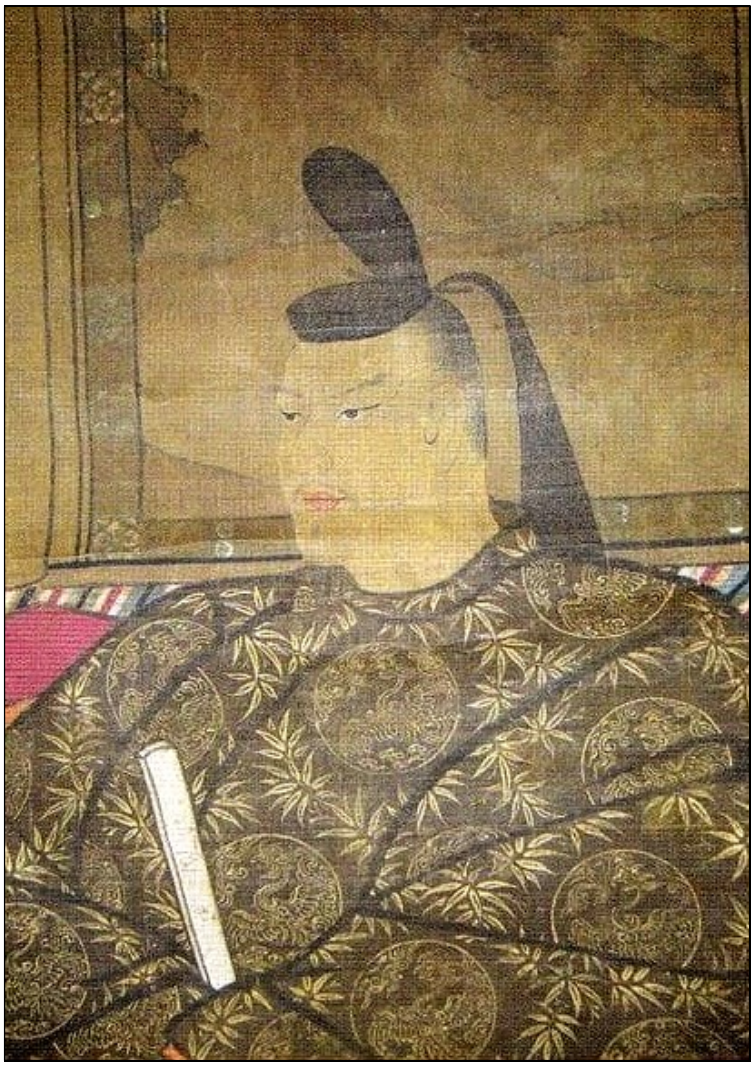
Comprising 30 volumes, the chronicle covers a vast timeline, beginning with Japan's creation myths and ending with the reign of Empress Jitō in 697. The contents can be broadly divided into two main sections:

- • The Age of the Gods (Volumes 1 and 2): this section details the Shinto creation myth, including the formation of the Japanese islands by Izanagi and Izanami, and the lineage of the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami, from whom the imperial family claims direct descent.

- • The Age of Humans (Volumes 3 to 30): this section transitions into historical reality, documenting the reigns of successive emperors. It covers major political milestones, such as the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, the Taika Reforms of 645 and various diplomatic exchanges with Chinese and Korean courts. Notably, the text frequently offers alternative versions of the same myths or events, reflecting a compilation of diverse clan oral traditions.

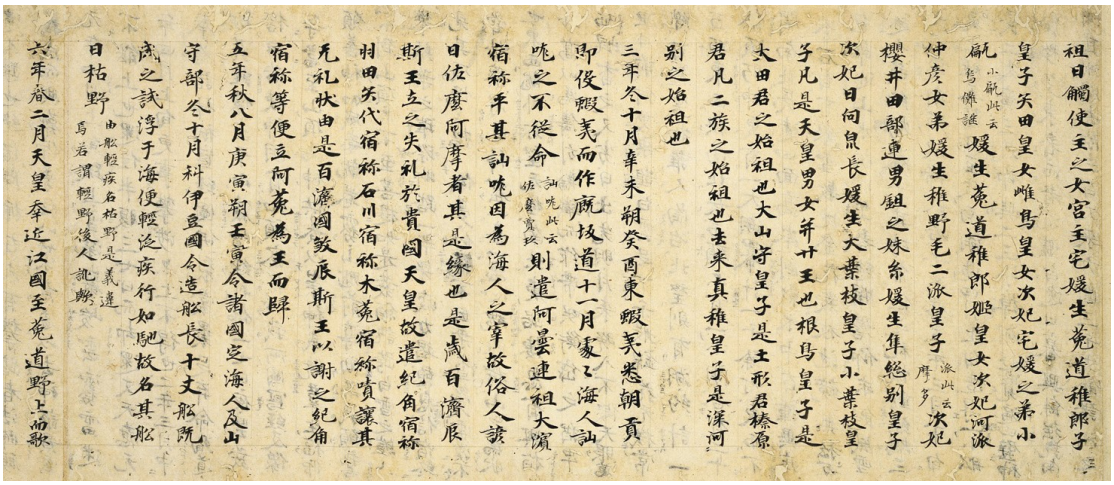
The legacy of *The Nihon Shoki* is both profound and long-lasting, shaping political ideology and cultural identity across the ensuing centuries. Within Japan, it established the enduring concept of divine Imperial rule. By weaving Shinto mythology into a formal historical narrative, it formulated the state ideology that the Emperor was a direct descendant of the gods — a belief that persisted as a powerful political tool well into the twentieth century. It served, moreover, as a primary source for the codification of Shinto rituals and beliefs, standardising a disparate network of local folklore into a cohesive national religion. In a broader Asian context, *The Nihon Shoki* marked Japan's formal entry into the Sinocentric diplomatic sphere as a self-aware and literate state. For modern-day historians of East Asia, the text provides critical, though at times biased, cross-references for the history of the Korean

kingdoms (Baekje, Silla and Goguryeo) and early Sino-Japanese relations. Importantly, the text demonstrates how early East Asian nations adopted and adapted Chinese administrative models and historiography to assert their own distinct identities. Overall, *The Nihon Shoki* is far more than a simple record of the past, since it is the literary crucible in which the concept of 'Japan' as a unified, divine and sovereign empire was first forged.



Portrait of Emperor Tenmu, in the collection of Yata-dera Temple. Emperor Tenmu (c. 630-686) was the 40th Emperor of Japan according to the traditional order of succession. The son of Emperor Jomei and Empress Kōgyoku, he was born Prince Ōama around 630. Ruling from 673 to 686, during the Asuka period, his life is mainly documented by 'The Nihon Shoki', which was commissioned during his reign.

A nineteenth century depiction of Prince Toneri (676-735), an imperial prince in the Nara period. He was a son of Emperor Tenmu. Toneri supervised the compilation of 'The Nihon Shoki'.



A page from a copy of 'The Nihon Shoki', early Heian period, c. ninth century

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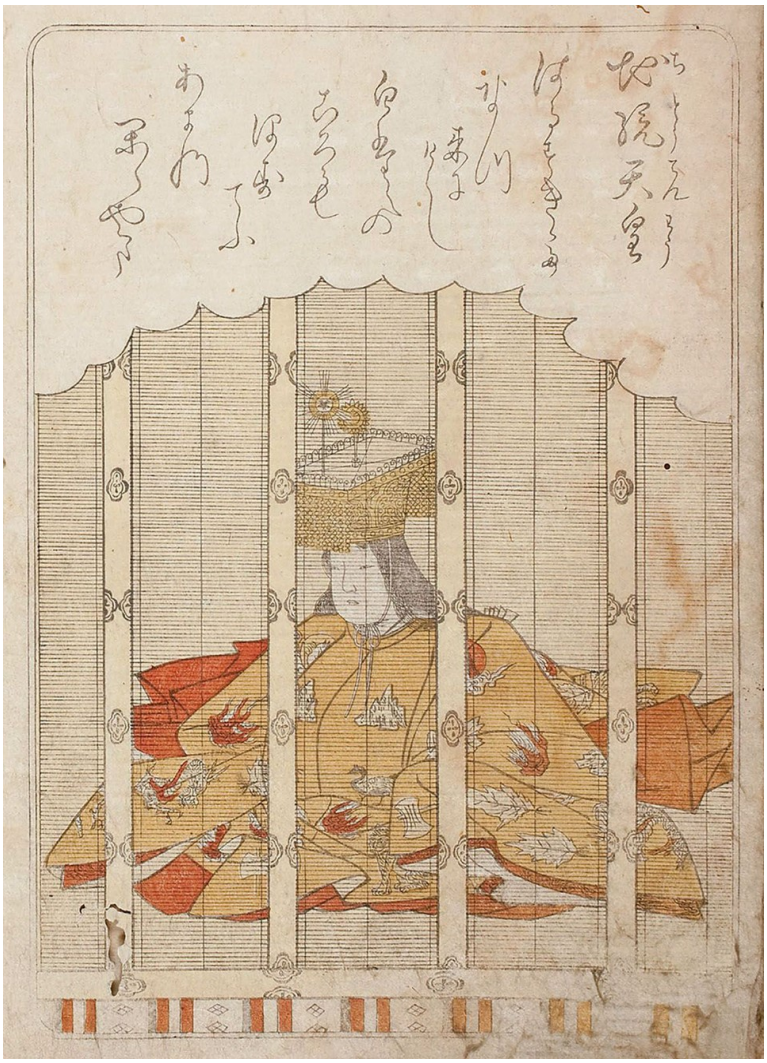
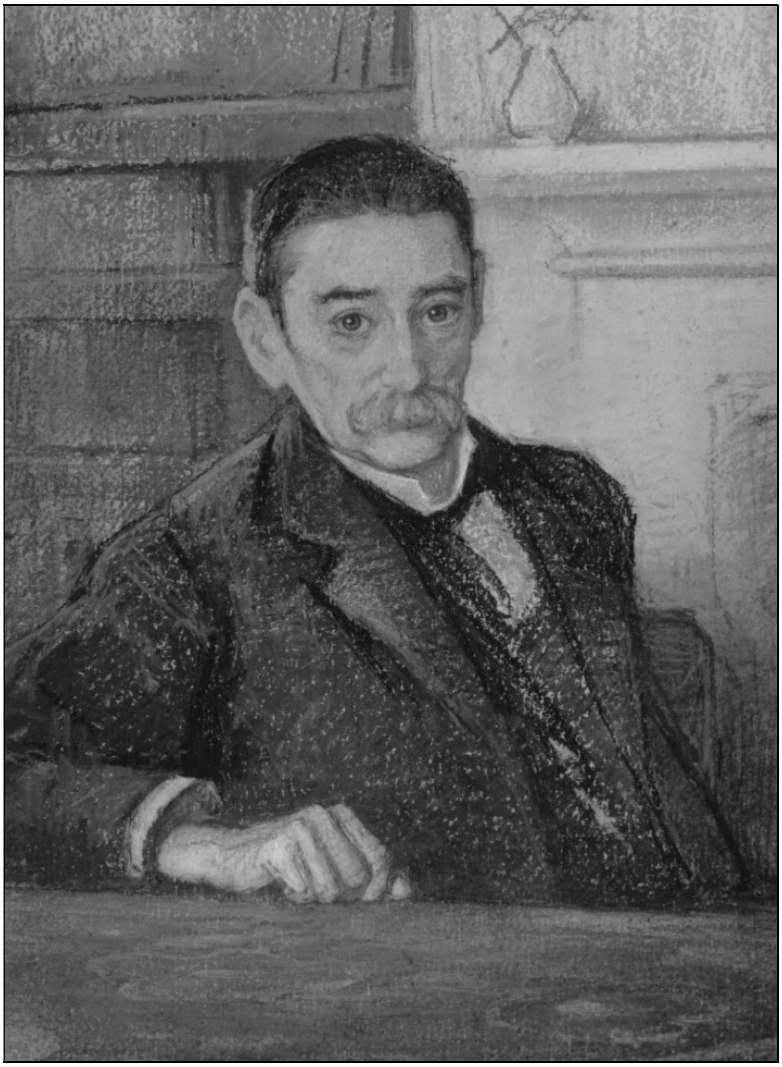
Nineteenth century portrait of Empress Genshō, to whom 'The Nihon Shoki' was presented on its completion. Empress Genshō (680-748) was the 44th monarch of Japan and the fifth of eight women to take on the role of empress regnant; also, she was the only one to have inherited her title from another empress regnant rather than from a male predecessor.



Portrait of Empress Jitō by Katsukawa Shunshō, eighteenth century — Empress Jitō (645-703) was the 41st monarch of Japan, whose reign spanned the years from 686 through 697. She is the last subject of 'The Nihon Shoki'.



The translator, William George Aston (1841-1911) was an Anglo-Irish diplomat, author and scholar of the languages and histories of Korea and Japan. Aston was the first translator of 'The Nihon Shoki' into English in 1896.

The original frontispiece for this translation: Izanami

PREFACE.

THE CHIEF OBJECT of preparing this translation of the standard native history of Ancient Japan, known as the *Nihongi*, was to make accessible to European scholars the very considerable store of material for the study of mythology, folk-lore, early civilization, and manners and customs which it contains. It may also prove of interest to those numerous Japanese who are acquainted with the English language, and who may have the curiosity to learn in what light their ancient history and traditions are viewed by a Western student.

As only a limited sale of a work of this kind could be expected, the translator was fortunate in being relieved from all pecuniary responsibility for its publication by the Japan Society. His special acknowledgments are due to those members by whose liberality a guarantee fund for this purpose has been provided.

It remains for him to express his indebtedness to other workers, by whose labours in the field of Japanese and Chinese learning he has freely profited. The writings of Messrs. Chamberlain and Satow [Now Sir Ernest Satow, K.C.M.G. H.M.'s Minister Plenipotentiary to Japan.] have been placed under frequent contribution, and for the latter part of the work, the scholarly German translation of the *Nihongi*, by Dr. Florenz, has been of the greatest possible assistance. He should also mention the names of Williams, Giles, Parker, Mayers, Gubbins, Hepburn, Anderson, Legge, and Eitel, whose writings are the indispensable companions of all students of Far-Eastern subjects. Other sources of information are acknowledged in the notes.

Amongst native Japanese writers the chief authorities have been the famous scholars Motoöri and Hirata. Their religious and patriotic prejudices often lead them to take views from which a European reader is forced to dissent, but no Western scholar can hope to rival or even to approach their vast erudition, clothed as it is in an easy and graceful style, undisfigured by pedantry. The translator gladly seizes this opportunity of expressing the strong admiration which he has long entertained for them. For the Notes, the *Shūkai* edition of the *Nihongi* and the *Tsūshō* Commentary have been largely drawn upon. The references to Chinese literature have been usually taken from these last-named sources. It is unnecessary to enumerate more particularly the other native works of reference which have been utilized. A copious list of them will be found in Dr. Florenz's Introduction.

The translator should not omit to express his thanks to Mr. W. Gowland for the use of the drawings and photographs relating to the Imperial Misasagi and sepulchral mounds, from which a number of the illustrations have been reproduced.

The vital importance of a good Index is fully recognized. No pains will be spared to make this part of the work as complete and satisfactory as possible.

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