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"Oh, lone pine tree! Oh, my brother!"

Prince Yamato Takeu, the archetype of Japan's long line of poignant, lonely heroes, started his career in an unedifying style by murdering his elder twin brother in a privy. The Prince's father, Emperor Keiko, had summoned him one day and asked why his brother was no longer appearing at mealtimes. Regular attendance at the imperial board was a token of loyalty, and the Emperor now ordered the young Prince to reprimand his delinquent twin.

Five days went by, but still the elder brother did not come. His Majesty accordingly asked, "Why has your brother not appeared for such a long time? Can it be that you did not give him my instructions?" "I have already instructed him," replied the Prince. "And how did you instruct him?" "Early in the morning," said the Prince, "when my brother went into the privy, I was lying in wait for him. I seized him, smashed him to pieces, tore off his limbs, wrapped them in a straw mat, and threw them away."

By any standards this was a severe penalty for missing some meals, and Emperor Keiko was shocked by his son's "rough, fearless nature." No doubt to prevent further mischief at Court he despatched the impetuous youth to Kyushu where he might put his zeal to better use by attacking the dissident Kumaso tribemen.

The young man who burst on the scene with an act of such furious violence died fourteen years later on a solitary plain, a melancholy, romantic figure who, having been defeated in his last battle, had lost all desire to live. It is this final image of Yamato Takeu that has most appealed to the sensibility of the
Japanese people and established him as their ar-hero, not his "rough, fearless nature" as a lad or his subsequent military successes, which were frequently marred by trickery and vindictiveness. The contrast between Yamato Takera's ferocity in his early career and his gentle, poetic quality towards the end confirms what is already clear from the chronicles: this many-faceted hero is no single historical personage but a composite figure who became the centre of an entire cycle of legends. "The Chronicles of Japan" gives his date of birth as a year corresponding to A.D. 72 in the Western calendar and describes his career during the following thirty decades as though he were an actual member of the imperial family who won a brilliant series of victories against the enemies of the Court until he was finally defeated in Oni Province and perished on the Plain of Nobo in the thirteenth year of the reign of Emperor Keikō. In fact, his story reflects the careers of numerous commanders who were sent from Yamato to subdue unruly tribes in Kyushu and the eastern districts and who died during their campaigns. The actual period is not the first but the fourth century A.D., the so-called "Middle Century" in Japanese history. It was a time of strife and disorder, marked by bitter fighting in the provinces and a concerted effort by the ruling clan, which had established itself in the Yamato region, to consolidate the population of the main islands of Japan under its control. From numerous tales and traditions that originated during this misty period and from a gallimaufry of myths, poems, legends, and Chinese literary influences there evolved the figure of "the Brave of Japan," who is presented in the chronicles as the greatest man of the period.

In some ways Yamato Takera is a standard folk hero that we can find in almost every culture on the boundary between legend and history. Yet he has a peculiarly Japanese appeal, and a study of his legend is a useful introduction to the mystique of the defeated hero. By piecing together the accounts in the chronicles, we can visualize him as a single person who actually lived and suffered and died some sixteen centuries ago. Much of the story belongs to the familiar paradigm of the universal legendary hero, who recurs in all cultures and countries, but there are significant variants, especially in the ending.

The hero's father, Keikō, was one of the semihistorical emperors who reigned during the troubled period of consolidation. He is listed as the twelfth Emperor of Japan (the present Em-

peror, Hirohito, who is theoretically his direct descendant, is the 124th); but like most of the early rulers he is a shadowy figure and, though he is said to have reigned for sixty years and to have lived to the venerable age of 106, almost nothing is known about his character or his practical achievements.

The most remarkable feat credited to Emperor Keikō is his marriage to his own great-granddaughter. This genealogical tour de force occurred when he took as wife a princess who was the great-granddaughter of his son, Yamato Takera. Among Keikō's eighty children were two male twins, the younger being the boy who later became Yamato Takera. The twins were "born on the same day with the same placenta." The Emperor, much impressed by this event, climbed on top of a large rock-mound in the palace to announce it to the Court, and his offspring were accordingly dubbed Otsu ("Great Mortar") and Ouau ("Little Mortar"). Prince Osu turned out to be a disobedient lad, who came to an untimely end. Concerning the younger twin the chronicles report that "while a child he was endowed with a brave spirit, and when he reached manhood he was of sublime beauty. The future hero was enormously tall, and strong enough—the hyperbole is Chinese—to lift a great tripod single-handedly.

At the age of fifteen Prince Osu was sent west to attack the Kumaso. The word "Kumaso," like "Enishi" for early inhabitants of the eastern and northern provinces, was a general term designating certain backward groups of tribesmen. Though belonging to the same racial stock as the main Japanese population, they were concentrated in remote regions and had been separated from the mainstream of cultural development for so long that they were regarded as aliens or aborigines who had to be forcibly subdued and brought under the civilizing control of the powerful Yamato clans; the campaigns against these rude, hiroute tribesmen started in the semilegendary period of Yamato Takera and continued for some four centuries until they had all finally been killed, pacified, or assimilated by about a.d. 800.

The hero's first victory over the Kumaso exemplified the "successful" part of his career. Before setting out for the west, the boy-hero visited his aunt, the High Priestess of the Great Shrine at Ise, and she gave him a robe, a skirt, and a sword.

When he reached the house of the Brave of the Kumaso, he saw that it was surrounded by three ranks of warriors who had entrenched them-
invited him to cross swords in a friendly bout. The chieftain agreed but he was of course unable to unsheathe his wooden weapon and Yamato Takeru lost no time in slashing him to death. He celebrated this triumph by composing the first of his famous poems, a thirty-one-syllable verse in which he mocked Izumo Takeru for carrying a sword without a blade.

When Yamato Takeru finally returned to the capital, exhausted from his campaigns, he was not greeted as a conquering hero or allowed to bask in his successes, but immediately sent on a new mission to subdue the Emishi in the eastern provinces. This was because his brother who by rights should have undertaken the next expedition was so terrified by the prospect that he ran away and hid in the grass. From an alternative account, however, one gets the impression that Emperor Keikō wanted to get his son out of the way as soon as possible, perhaps on the principle that there is nothing more dangerous than “a hero out of work.” In any case, at this point in the narrative the figure of Yamato Takeru assumes a different cast: the callous, unprincipled bully gives way to a solitary, ill-starred wanderer who, for all his ardent loyalty and achievements in battle, is destined for defeat and early death.

On receiving his marching orders, Yamato Takeru addressed the Emperor as follows: “It is only a few years ago that I subdued the Kumaso. Now it is the Emishi in the East who have rebelled. When shall we finally have peace in the land? I am weary of fighting. Yet I shall exert all my powers to quell this new rebellion.” Emperor Keikō then gave his son a symbol of military command (a Chinese-type axe in “The Chronicles of Japan” account, a giant spear in the more Japanese version of “The Record of Ancient Events”) and delivered a long harangue about the importance of subduing “the rough deities in the mountains, the malicious demons in the plains, who bar the highways and obstruct the roads, causing much suffering to our people.” Clearly there was little distinction between these supernatural creatures and the actual tribesmen who worshipped them; for the Emperor immediately went on to say, “Among the eastern savages the most powerful of all are the Emishi.” He described their primitive state of culture (“men and women dwell together in promiscuity. . . . they dress in furs and drink blood”) and ordered Yamato Takeru to subdue them all so that the Imperial House might be preserved.
Before leaving for his final campaign, the hero once more visited the Great Isé Shrine. Keenly aware of the Emperor’s shabby treatment, he unhurriedly told the High Priestess, Emperor Keiko’s sister: “Is it because His Majesty wants me to die early? First he sent me to attack the wicked people of the West. Then hardly had I returned when he again sent me on a campaign, this time to subdue the wicked people of the twelve eastern districts, and he has not even provided me with troops. Why should he have done this if it is not that he wishes me to die at an early age?” The High Priestess responded to her nephew’s cri de coeur by giving him a sword, which later became famous as Kusanagi (“the grass mowing”), and also a bag that he was to open in case of emergency.

On his way east Yamato Takeru was betrothed to a princess in Owari Province, but decided not to marry her until he had carried out his mission for the Emperor. When he reached the eastern province of Sagami, a local chieftain deceived him with a story about a ferocious deity who dwelt in a marsh on the plain, and Yamato Takeru innocently set off for the attack. As soon as he was in the plain, the chieftain set fire to it, but the hero saved himself by mowing down the grass with his sword and by setting a “counter-fire” with a flint that his aunt had providently included in his emergency kit.

Yamato Takeru’s next adventure in his “road of trials” is one of his most famous, no doubt because it is imbued with the type of pathos that has always characterized the hero in people’s imaginations. While crossing the straits between Sagami and Kazusa (present-day Tokyo Bay), he aroused the enmity of the Deity of the Straits, who promptly stirred up the waves and set his boat adrift. Princess Otoochibana, who was accompanying him (and who is rather confusingly identified as his “empress”), knew exactly what must be done in such emergencies: “I will go into the water in your stead,” she declared, “so that you, my prince, may carry out the sacred mission that has been entrusted to you and may return to His Majesty and report it.” Then eight layers of rush matting, eight leather mats, and eight silken carpets were spread on top of the waves, and the Princess lay on them and sank into the water. This immediately calmed the sea, and Yamato Takeru was able to cross the bay. Seven days later Princess Otoochibana’s comb was washed ashore and carefully buried in a tomb.
In the earlier part of his career the hero was pictured as an unfeeling brute; now he became a different person—a man capable of being profoundly moved by a woman’s self-sacrifice. “He was forever lamenting the death of Princess Ootachiba. One day when he had climbed to the top of Mount Ushbi and was gazing towards the southeast, he sighted three times and said, “Alas, my wife [I tamba].” Accordingly the provinces east of the mountains were named the Land of Atumara.

The hero’s final encounters were not with the hairy Emishi but with a series of malignant local deities. It is as though he had now reached a stage where mere human enemies were unworthy of his powers. Entering the wild province of Shinano, he ascended a great mountain, “bravely making his way through the smoky mist.” When he reached the summit, he became hungry and sat down for a solitary repast. The god of the mountain took this opportunity to torment the Prince by changing himself into a white deer, came and stood before him. Yamato Takeru, though startled by this apparition, had the wit to pick up a clove of garlic that remained from his meal and fling it at the deer, hitting the animal in the eye and promptly killing it. This was the act of a true culture-hero: by slaying the beast Yamato Takeru saved all future travellers from the malevolent effect of the god’s breath, which in the past had always made it dangerous to cross the mountain. His encounter with the deer did not leave him unscathed, for he became crazed and, losing his way, wandered about helplessly until a kindly white dog came and led him down the other side of the mountain.

Yamato Takeru decided that the time had come to return to the capital and give the Emperor a report of his eastern expedition. On his way he stopped in Owari and married the Princess, but there was little chance for essential dalliance, since he was now informed about a fierce god who was entrenched on Mount Ibuki near Lake Biwa. In an access of terror he declared that he would subdue this particular deity with his bare hands, and he promptly set off by himself, leaving the invincible Kusunagi sword in his wife’s keeping. When Yamato Takeru reached Mount Ibuki, the deity assumed the shape of a huge white serpent (or, in another account, of a white bear “as large as a cow”) and lay across the road in front of him. Once again the hero was the victim of a ruse, since he was deluded into believing that the monster was not the actual deity but his messenger. A mere servant, he explained to the animal, was hardly worth the trouble of someone who had vanquished so many actual gods. Yamato Takeru then continued up the mountain. It was a fatal mistake. As “The Record of Ancient Events” specifies with tragic precision, “This was not a messenger of the deity; it was the deity himself.” By addressing himself directly to this supernatural creature Yamato Takeru had violated a taboo. “Then the god of the mountain raised clouds in the sky and produced a hail storm. The top of the mountain was covered with mist and the lower part shrouded in gloom. Unable to find the path, Yamato Takeru wandered about in confusion, but he forced his way onward through the mist and finally managed to escape.”

Yet the hero had been mortally wounded by the supernatural fallout. When he reached the foot of the mountain, he was still in a daze “as though he were a drunken man.” At this point in the story Yamato Takeru made the most striking of all his remarks: “I had always felt in my heart that one day I would soar high up into the sky. But now my legs will not move, my flesh will decay and become all wobbly.” Realizing that his ambitions had been thwarted and that he was now hopelessly earthbound, the exhausted hero bumbled along, supporting himself with a stick. For a while he recovered his senses thanks to the magic waters of a spring at the foot of the mountain. But the benignant power that had protected the hero in his superhuman passage had now finally deserted him. His illness (which a modern medical scholar has rather prosaically diagnosed as beriberi) soon returned and, realizing that death was imminent, the young man did not even stop on his way through Owari to see his bride but pressed on for the capital, determined to make his last report to the Emperor in person. He failed. On reaching the Plain of Nabo in northern Kii, Yamato Takeru collapsed and, after reciting a final series of nostalgic poems, sent a farewell message concluding with the words, “I had hoped that the day and hour might come when I could report on my mission to Your Majesty, but my span of life has suddenly reached its end. Time passes as swiftly as a four-horse carriage flitting by a crack in the wall, and nothing will stay its course. So now I must lie down alone on this wild plain without a single companion to hear my words. Yet why should I repine at the death of this body? My only regret is that I shall never again behold Your Majesty.”

This was the end. He died at the age of thirty. On hearing
the news, the Emperor was shattered. He could not eat or sleep, and spent his days in tears and breast-beating. His former doubts about the Prince’s “tough, fearless nature” were entirely forgotten as he recalled the young man’s heroism.

When the Emishi arose in the East, there was no one else I could send to chastise them, and despite my deep love [for my son] I had to despatch him to the land of the rebels. Since then not a day has passed without my thinking of him; morning and evening I have paced these rooms, longing for the day of his return. What curse is upon me, what evil have I committed, that he should be snatched from me so unexpectedly? Who now can possibly undertake our great enterprises of state?

The Emperor ordered that an imperial tumulus be built on the Plain of Nobe, and thus (in accordance with universal custom) the hero was buried where he had died. The last part of the legend is perhaps the most remarkable.

Now Yamato Takeru was transformed into a white bird, and came out of the tomb and flew towards the Land of Yamato. The officials accordingly opened his coffin and, looking in, saw that the shroud was empty and the corpse had vanished. Messengers were sent in pursuit of the white bird. It stopped first on Hitachinokuni, in Yamato, and a tumulus was built there. Next the white bird flew to Kochi, alighting in the village of Furushichi, where another tumulus was built. Finally it soared high into the sky. Nothing of the Prince remained to be buried except his robes and his Court cap.

The myth of the white bird may possibly reflect Taoist ideas about immortal spirits. No doubt it is also connected with beliefs about the magical power of white animals. Its main significance in the story of Yamato Takeru, however, is surely the image of flying and escape: the hero, thwarted in his dreams of “soaring up high into the sky,” that is, of transcending the worldly limitations that lead to defeat and failure, finds eventual liberation in death. This accords perfectly with the romantic character of Yamato Takeru in the second part of his career: the melancholy young hero who makes his way through the wild eastern provinces, intrepidly attacking hostile deities and tribesmen until finally he is overcome by the wiles of a mountain god and dies on a barren plain, the victim of a typically romantic confrontation between fate and his own pride.

Yamato Takeru’s status as the great romantic hero of the legendary period is confirmed by his love of poetry, the indispensable art for men and women of sensibility throughout Japanese culture. Military men in Japan, unlike their typical Western counterparts whose pleasures tended to focus on wine, women, and slaughter, have revered a remarkable taste for poetry; and throughout the long centuries of warfare their respect for things artistic did much to redeem the pervasive brutality of samurai life. Unlike the West, where there has traditionally been a debate concerning the comparative virtues conferred on a man by arms and by arts, Japan has never regarded the two as incompatible. Far from it: a feeling for poetry was a confirmation of the warrior’s sincerity. For all the conventional limits of its form, the little tanka verse with its rigid syllabic framework has been honoured as the supreme means of expressing deep emotion. The Japanese tragic hero, whose life is pitched at a higher emotional level than most men’s, will often reveal his most powerful feelings in verse, especially as his career races towards its culmination. The tradition of farewell poems goes back to the country’s most distant part, and hardly a single Japanese hero, from Yamato Takeru in legendary times until the karakazeru pilots in recent years, died without having first taken poetic leave of the world. This verse is rarely of the highest quality, yet, whatever such recitations may lack in elegance and prosodic skill, they will always reflect the emotional sincerity that marks the true hero.

With one unceasing exception Yamato Takeru’s poems belong to the romantic part of his career, which started with his departure for the eastern provinces. Shortly after the hero’s lament for the drowned Princess there is an incident that exemplifies his respect for the ancient art of versification. Yamato Takeru had reached the land of Kai and, having evidently lost track of the time, he asked how long had elapsed since he passed Tsukuba (a mountainous district in Hitachi Province). He worded the question as the first lines of a poem, and the answer was provided in perfect metrical form (5-7-7 syllables) by an old man who was tending the fire. The hero was so delighted by this humble labourer’s show of poetic dexterity that he appointed him to be Local Chieftain of the East.

Among the romantic verses attributed to Yamato Takeru the following lines are said to have been composed during his final illness when he discovered a sword that he had left under a pine
tree. The personification of the tree, an unusual device for early Japanese poetry, evokes the hero's forlorn state during his final days:

On the Cape of Chus
Directly facing Owari,
There you stand,
Oh, lone pine tree!
Oh, my brother!
Were you a man,
Oh, lonely pine,
I would give you a sword
I would give you robes to wear.
Oh, lone pine tree!
Oh, my brother!

By far the most famous of Yamato Takern’s poems are the final “homesick songs,” of which the following are the first and the last:

Ah, Yamato, fairest of all lands,
Cliff with mountains like a many-layered hedge of green!
How clear to me is the beauty of Yamato!

Alas, the precious sword
That I left by the maiden’s bed!
Ah, for that sword of mine!

“As soon as he had finished these poems,” reports “The Record of Ancient Events,” “His Highness died.”

It is above all the aura surrounding his end that established Yamato Takern, among the multifarious figures of myth and legend, as the model hero. In most cultures, “if the monomyth is to fulfill its promise, not human failure or superhuman success but human success is what we shall have to be shown.” The Japanese tradition represents a departure from the monomyth of mankind’s central idea by not requiring a happy return for the legendary hero. The ancient chronicles contain only one other character whose individuality emerges as strongly as that of Yamato Takern. This is the tempestuous windstorm deity, Susanoo no Mikoto, who, owing to his unruly nature and abominable conduct, was disgraced among the gods and banished from the Plain of High Heaven. Susanoo, too, is pictured as an unhappy, isolated figure. Despite his wildness and bluster he has an unmistakable sincerity and even a certain outrageous charm; all this, combined with his poignant role as outcast who wanders about in a straw coat vainly seeking shelter, would have tended to establish him as the perfect Japanese anti-hero. He was disqualified, however, by having flagrantly violated certain basic rules of society and, worse still, by having ended his career safely and successfully enshrined in his great Izumo Palace among numerous wives and broods of deity-children. Yamato Takern, on the other hand, had the advantage of capping his early success with failure when, after an uninterrupted series of victories, he suffered a touching defeat and died before he could return to Yamato for his last report to the Emperor. Here he sets the pattern for great historical figures like Yoshitsune and Saigo Takamori whose early triumphs led to glorious defeat.
"The Emperor's Shield"

The Japanese warrior-hero has always known that, however many battles he may win and rewards he may receive, the fate that awaits him in the end is tragic—tragic not as a result of mistakes or lack of stamina or ill luck, though all these may be involved, but because of the karma of the man who embraces a painful destiny.

It is essential that the hero be prepared for this sublime end so that when the moment comes he will know precisely how to act and not be swayed by his instinct for survival or other human weakness. His final, blazing meeting with his fate is the most important event in his life. To continue fighting against all odds and to acquit himself properly at the end will give validity to his previous efforts and sacrifices; to die bravely will make a mockery of everything that has lent meaning to his existence. "Thinkconstantly of your death!" were the last words that the loyalist hero, Masashige, is said to have spoken to his son before committing harakiri in 1336; and twelve years later the young man, having fought on the same losing side as his father, was duly defeated and killed in battle.

The Western hero, too, is fearless in death; indeed, in any part of the world and at any time in history a hero who was scared of dying would be a somewhat absurd anomaly. For the Japanese warrior, however, death has a particular psychological significance, since it epitomizes the very sense of his existence. "One's way of dying," writes a famous samurai scholar, "can validate one's entire life." Nobility in the face of certain defeat proclaims the magnificent tragedy of life, and the ultimate criterion of heroic sincerity is the way in which a man confronts his end. This point of view is summed up in the most influential of all Japanese military treatises, which contains the seminal statement, "The way of the warrior is [finally] revealed in the act of dying."

Of all the possible fates none is more odious to the warrior than capture and execution by the enemy; for this means intolerable humiliation not only for himself but, for more damaging, for the reputation of his family both retroactively and in generations to come. The most cataclysmic defeat will not mar the reputation of a hero or his kinmen. Far from it: in the mystique of Japanese heroism nothing succeeds like failure. But, however hopeless the hero's situation may have become, to be held captive even for a short time is an irreparable disaster. The honourable status of prisoner of war, which was established at an early stage in Western warfare and included special understandings about the custody of important captives, ransom, and the like, was never accepted in Japan. The soldier who allowed himself to be captured automatically lost his dignity as a warrior and could expect only the most brutal treatment: savage torture, a humiliating form of execution, mutilation of his corpse, and, worst of all, the epithet of torite ("prisoner").

Since defeat was such a likely outcome of the warrior's way and capture such an unthinkable disgrace, it is logical that suicide should have become accepted as the honourable death for the failed hero. Hardly a single hero in the Western world has ended his life by voluntary suicide. But since the earliest recorded period of Japanese history a warrior's self-destruction was accepted as a release from shame, an act of honour and courage, and an ultimate proof of integrity. From the time of the sanguinary civil wars in the twelfth century the particular method that became associated with the samurai tradition was harakiri, an excruciatingly painful form of self-torture which served as conclusive evidence that, though he had failed in his purpose, here was a man who could be respected by friend and enemy alike for his physical courage, determination, and sincerity. Long before the twelfth century, however, vanquished warriors resorted to suicide in order to avoid capture. The most common method was to stab oneself in the throat and sever the carotid artery with a short sword or dagger; this disagreeable but virtually foolproof method was also used in later times by solitary warriors who had...
disenbowed themselves and wished to accelerate their departure.

Such was the death of Yorozu. He is the first hero who is recorded as having committed suicide after defeat in battle, and he is also the first of the full-fledged heroic failures. In a clash of arms that took place in 872 and marked a turning point in early Japanese history, he fought valiantly on the side that stood for threatened national traditions, that lost the battle, and that was irrevocably ruined.

Yorozu was not a famous man. It is only by the manner of his dying that we know him. He came from a humble family, and the chronicles give no details about his antecedents or career; everything has been focussed on how he behaved during the day of his defeat when he provided a conspicuous display of military virtuosity, a sort of bravura finale which occurs again and again in the story of Japanese heroes.

The battle that became the occasion for Yorozu’s glory was the culmination of a drawn-out conflict between the two leading clans of the day, the Mononobe and the Soga. The tension between them came to a head after the death of Emperor Bidatsu, which occurred about two years before the battle. “The Chronicles of Japan” records an encounter between the chieftains of the hostile clans, Mononobe no Moriya and Soga no Umako. It suggests a rather low level of political debate:

When His Majesty’s body was lying in the palace of temporary burial in Hirose, the Great Minister, Lord Umako, came to deliver his eulogy. As he entered the hall, he was wearing a sword. Seeing this, the Great Chief, Mononobe no Moriya, burst out laughing and exclaimed, “He looks just like a little bird that has been pierced by an arrow.” When it was Lord Moriya’s turn to deliver his oration, he was trembling so violently that Lord Umako mocked him, saying, “He ought to have bells tied to his hands.”

This exchange is said to have been the origin of the enmity between Moriya and Umako; more probably it was the most flagrant episode in the conflict that had smouldered for some fifteen years, ever since they had succeeded, as headmen of their respective clans, to the two leading civil posts in the land. The political history of Japan in the sixth century was marked by the rapidly growing power of a few great clans who, though theoretically inferior to the imperial clan, had acquired such influence that they were able to decide crucial matters like policy in Korea, campaigns against the Emeriti, and even the imperial succession. The contest for supremacy among the leading clan chieftains grew more intense from decade to decade, fatally weakening Japan’s position in Korea and vesting the secular authority of the imperial family, which towards the end of the century had become a mere tool in their struggle for power.

About the middle of the century the two leading contestants were the Mononobe and the Soga. The former had risen to power in the previous century; at first their main official duty had been to superintend certain Shinto ceremonies at Court, but they shifted increasingly to judicial functions, and during the reign of Emperor Yuraku in the middle of the fifth century Mononobe clasmens assisted the Throne as a sort of gendarmerie. Whereas the Mononobe had been particularly effective as an auxiliary force to powerful emperors who aimed at subjugating dissident factions and extending central control, the Sogas flourished in times when emperors were weak and could be dominated by outside clans. They were consummate politicians and knew how to manipulate individuals and groups to serve their family’s own ends. It was they who initiated the brilliant system of “marriage politics” that was used in later times by the Fujiwara and other families who ruled the country in the Emperor’s name. The device of marrying Soga girls to imperial princes, thus ensuring that future emperors would have Soga mothers and (more important) Soga fathers-in-law, was started in the sixth century by Inma, the founder of the clan’s greatness, and it proved more effective than their military power in preserving political supremacy.

The most important issue that the Sogas used in their struggle with the older, more conservative clans was whether Buddhism should be officially adopted in Japan. Since the fifth century, knowledge of the great Indian religion had been percolating into Japan by way of the Korean peninsula; but the traditional date for its actual introduction is the middle of the sixth century when the ruler of one of the Korean kingdoms presented the Court in Yamato with a gold and copper image of the Buddha, a number of sutras, and certain accoutrements used in Buddhist ceremonial. This momentous gift (which was said to have been motivated by the hope of obtaining military aid) forced the Court to take official cognizance of the religion, and inevita-
bly the question became involved with existing clan rivalries. The Mononobe and other ancient clans, who from time imme- morial had enjoyed special responsibilities concerning the worship of the native Shinto deities, naturally wished to maintain the old order and opposed anything that might undermine the status quo. The rising Sogas emerged as the great anti-traditionalist clan and the champions of Buddhism.

Owing to their knowledge of foreign conditions and their special connexions with Korea, the Sogas had undoubtedly been acquainted with Buddhism long before its official introduction and some of their clan leaders may have been secret believers. Now they exerted their powerful influence at Court to persuade the Emperor to accept the foreign religion, which not only offered supernatural solutions to practical difficulties but addressed itself to the great problems of existence and death with which Shintoism was largely unconcerned.

A seesaw battle between the traditionalists and the innovators continued for several decades, each side exploiting natural disasters to discredit the opposing faith. In 585, for example, the Mononobe and Nukatomes persuaded Emperor Bihata to command that Buddhism be forbidden; a Buddhist statue that Soga no Umako had installed in his temple was thrown into a canal, the temple itself destroyed, and the nuns taken out and flogged in public. This ungracious behavior was followed by an epidemic of boils and sores, which the Sogas promptly attributed to the wrath of the Buddhas. Umako was accordingly permitted to resume the practice of Buddhism and the nuns were returned to him. A few years later he succeeded in introducing a Buddhist priest into the Palace where Emperor Yōmei lay dying of sores. The leaders of the traditional clans were horrified by this departure from precedent, but owing to Soga "marriage politics" (the Emperor in question was Umako's nephew) they were in a weak position at Court. Yōmei is said to have been converted in consequence, thus becoming the first Japanese Emperor to accept the Buddhist faith. The story may well be apocryphal, and the initial resistance to Buddhism at Court was probably far stronger than the chronicles suggest; yet it is clear that in the long run the "new," advanced religion from abroad had far more to offer the Japanese, both spiritually and culturally, than native Shinto practices, and that in opposing it the traditionalists were fighting a hopeless struggle.

As happened so often in early Japanese history, the spark that produced the final explosion was a succession dispute. The rules of succession were vague, and often an imperial illness or death resulted in clashes between groups who supported different candidates among the Emperor's brothers or his sons. When the Throne was weak and rival factions strong and embittered, these clashes led to violence or even civil war. Such was the situation in Japan at the death of Emperor Bidatsu in 588, which was shortly followed by the death of his successor, Yōmei (a Soga candidate), and the slaughter of Prince Anahe (the choice of the Mononobe). The Sogas played the political game with their usual skill and soon Umako was ready to launch an all-out attack against Mononobe no Moriya, the one remaining enemy who blocked him and his clan from undisputed power. The Mononobes had evidently not expected that the final clash would come so soon and they were taken by surprise. In the culminating battle the forces were absurdly unequal. Umako had carefully formed an alliance that included many of the important Yamato clans; and, owing to astute Soga politics, he also enjoyed the support of most of the young princes at Court, notably his grandnephew, Prince Usayado, who later (under the name of Shōtoku Taishi) became one of the most impressive rulers in all Japanese history.

The main potential backing for Mononobe no Moriya came from the old provincial clans, but by the very nature of traditional autonomy their strength was scattered and could not be mobilized in time for the decisive battle. Deprived of outside support, Moriya had to rely almost entirely on his own clansmen and slaves. This force was no match for the Soga coalition, but Moriya and his men fought bravely. At one point in the battle he climbed into the fork of a tree and shot down arrows "like streaks of rain." His troops filled a house occupied by the enemy and overflowed into the plain. "The army of the Imperial Princes and the troops of the high officials were terrified and fell back three times."

The turning point came when Mononobe no Moriya was pierced by an arrow and killed. The main group of his followers immediately lost heart and dispersed. Many of them disguised themselves in servants' clothes so that they might avoid capture; others changed their names and titles and escaped into the countryside. It was a complete rout. Though the engagement was
fought on a small scale (the battle has not even received an official name), this was one of the decisive clashes in Japanese history.

The Sogas were totally victorious and, having eliminated all their rivals, could carry out their policies as they wished. Their candidate, Umako's nephew, promptly ascended the throne as Emperor Suzaku. The Buddhist religion, which could now be fully and freely practised, was given open support by the Court and the earliest of the great temples and pagodas were constructed as visible symbols of the new order. The ancient tribal system received its first great blow. No longer was the country to be divided among strong independent clans, instead there would be a coalition of forces centred about the Sogas, who would work in the name of the reigning Emperor to subjugate recalcitrant local magnates and tribal groups, to preserve what was left of Japan's position in Korea, to foster close relations with China, and to advance the country culturally with the help of Buddhism and other imports from the Asian continent. In almost every respect the Soga forces represented the wave of the future, and their victory paved the way for the Great Reform in the following century.

Yet the most impressive figure to emerge from the battle of 678 is not Soga no Umako or one of the victorious imperial princes like Umayado but a common warrior who fought on the losing side. "The Chronicles of Japan," our only source for the story of Yorozu, is certainly not prejudiced in favour of the Mononobe cause, which ran counter to centralization, cultural advance, and the general trend of Japan's future development; the reason for Yorozu's prominence is that his short career epitomizes the mystique of the fallen hero. Here is the full account of how he fought and died:

A follower of the Great Chiefship, Mononobe no Moriya, by name

Yorozu of the Totori, was in command of a large company of men guarding the [Great Chief's] mansion at Naniwa. When he heard that the Great Chiefship had fallen, he escaped on his horse in the middle of the night. He headed for the village of Arima in the district of China and, having passed his wife's house, hid in the hills. The Court considered the matter and announced, "It is because Yorozu has treacherous intentions that he has concealed himself in these hills. Let his family be promptly put to death! These orders must be obeyed without delay.

Now of his own accord Yorozu came out alone from the hills with a sword by his side and a spear in his hand. His clothes were torn and filthy, and there was a look of great distress on his face. The officials sent hundreds of guardsmen to surround him. Yorozu was frightened and hid in a thicket of bamboo, where he tied cords to several of the stems and pulled them to shake the bamboo to confuse the guards. As one of the bamboo fell, he leapt over it. The guardsmen sent Yorozu, shooting arrows at him from the other side of a river, but no one managed to hit him. At this point one of the guards dived ahead of Yorozu and, lying down by the river bank, struck his bow and shot him in the kneecap. Yorozu instantly pulled out the arrow and, fixing it in his own bow, shot it back at the guard. Then, provoking himself on the ground, he called out, "The Emperor's shield, a man whose courage would be devoted to defending His Majesty—that is what I wished to be. But no one asked what my real intentions were, and now instead I find myself in these dire straits. Let someone come forward who can speak with me, for I wish to know whether I am to be killed or to be made prisoner." The guards raced towards Yorozu and started shooting at him, but he managed to ward off their arrows and, stringing his own bow, killed more than thirty of the men. Then, having taken up the sword and cut his bow into three pieces, he bent back the sword and hurled it into the river. Finally he seized the dagger that he had been carrying besides his sword and stabbed himself in the throat, and thus he died.

The Governor of Kawachi reported the circumstances of Yorozu's death to the Court, who then issued the following sealed order: "Let his body be cut into eight pieces, and let each piece be sent to one of the Eight Provinces so that it may be exposed on a gibbet! Just as the Governor was going to carry out the order and dismember Yorozu's corpse for exposure, there was a roar of thunder and it started raining in torrents.

Now the white dog whom Yorozu had kept with him looked out towards the sky and then looked down and walked howling round the corpse, and finally picked up his master's head in his mouth and placed it on an ancient mound. He then lay down next to the body and started to kneel in front of it. The Governor of Kawachi, much impressed by the dog's strange conduct, reported it to the Court. The officials were deeply moved by the story and issued a further sealed order: "The dog has believed in a way that is rare in this world; and that should be made known even to later ages. Let Yorozu's relations be ordered to build a tomb where they may bury the remains!" The members of Yorozu's
family accordingly erected a tomb in the village of Arima and there they buried Yorozu and his dog.

The story of Yorozu’s death was written long before any specific warrior code had evolved in Japan; indeed it antedates by many centuries the formation of a distinct samurai class. Yet his behaviour in defeat is an almost ideal model of what was later prescribed for the fighter who has failed in his last battle. Clearly the ethos of the Japanese warrior far preceded any formulation of rules or principles.

Yorozu’s initial hesitation—his escape into the hills and his terror when surrounded by the guards—serves only to accentuate the nobility of his last moments; for this reminds us that he is no supernatural hero, immune to human fear and hesitation, but an ordinary man who, like all other living creatures, wishes to survive, yet who in a crisis can draw on fantastic resources of energy and courage. Once he has decided his final course of action, Yorozu moves ahead unerringly, and from the moment in the bamboo grove until he plunges the dagger into his throat he seems, like so many of the defeated heroes in later Japanese history, to be propelled by the momentum of his own bravery.

Crippled by an arrow in his knee, he realizes that escape is impossible and, having despatched as many of the enemy as humanly possible, he destroys his two main weapons, the symbols of his military function, and stabs himself to death rather than incur the disgrace of capture. If Yorozu had lived half a millennium later, he would almost certainly have preceded his death by disembowelment, but in yûkai he was not yet part of the warrior’s repertory.) At this point the practical outcome of the battle no longer matters. What counts is not victory or defeat but the strength to pursue an honourable course of action until the finish.

Yorozu’s brief, incandescent career establishes him as one of the earliest historical exemplars of maku. The cardinal quality of the Japanese hero. Maku is usually translated as “sincerity,” but its connotations reach far deeper and wider than the English word and come closer to the spiritual power to which Saint Thomas More (one of the noblest failures in Western History) referred when he prayed for the grace “to set thyself at nought.”

The focus of maku varies in different periods of history, but its common denominator has always been a purity of motive, which derives from man’s longing for an absolute meaning out of time and from a realization that the social, political world is essentially a place of corruption whose materiality is incompatible with the demands of pure spirit and truth.

Rejecting this grossly material world in which he finds himself, the man of maku proceeds not by logical argument, pragmatic compromise, or a common-sense effort to attune himself to the “movement of the times,” but by the force of his own true feelings. Instead of depending on careful, rational plans and adjustments, he is propelled by unquestioning spontaneity. This aspect of maku is reflected in that eager, undaunted strain which is common to Pure Land Buddhism, Zen, Wang Yang-ming philosophy, and other approaches to life that have been prominent in the Japanese tradition. “Sincerity” in the words of a modern Western observer “spells readiness to discard everything that might hinder a man from acting wholeheartedly on the pure and unpredictable impulses that spring from the secret centre of his being.”

Selfless dedication or, in more accurate psychological terms, belief in one’s own selflessness, is a further mark of the sincere man. “I am intent on loyalty (kôgi),” declared a modern nationalist martyr (who did not conceal his courage with any false modesty), “while you gentlemen aspire to perform meritorious services (kôgi).” The sincere man has freed himself from the besetting sins of “egoism” and worldly ambition and is undaunted by the danger of personal risk and sacrifice. The purity of his intentions is revealed in action, usually of a dangerous nature, talk, unless reflected in deeds, is always a mark of insincerity and hypocrisy.

Sincerity precedes not only the realistic demands of established authority but also conventional rectitude; for its ultimate criterion is not the objective righteousness of a cause but the honesty with which the hero espouses it. Thus even an executed felon like the famous nineteenth-century robber, Nanzon Kozo, can be esteemed as a hero, since his motives were believed to be pure.

In his struggle against corrupt political power the hero’s main weapon is sincerity of resolve. Though at first he may achieve impressive (even miraculous) results, his noble renunciation of everything temporal and impure disposes him to defeat,
typically culminating in suicide. While sincerity is thus apt to produce worldly disaster, the failed hero earns immortal respect for that purity of spirit which his "successful" counterpart can never attain.

Yorozu (like the prototypical Yamaru Takeshi) is described at the end as being entirely alone. He has no faithful Achates to help him while he is being bounded by the government's troops or to give him comfort during his last terrifying moments; his only companion is his white dog, and this mysterious creature does not enter the story until after his master is dead and has been decapitated. The final loneliness of Yorozu is, of course, related to the pathos that typically surrounds the failed Japanese hero who ends his life as a solitary fugitive hunted down by the successful forces of law and order. By this bizarre behavior the dog dramatizes the poignancy of Yorozu's death and succeeds in stirring sympathy even among the enemy.

When Yorozu is introduced, the battle has already been lost; from the outset he is cast in the role of loser and the only question is how he will acquit himself in defeat. This defeat was not the result of accident or bad luck. The cause that Yorozu supported was doomed, not only owing to the unequal military balance, but because the Sogas and their imperial allies represented forces that in the long run were bound to prevail. It is significant that Yorozu, the first of the historical failed heroes, should have fought for a conservative clan representing the most ancient of Japanese religious and social traditions in opposition to a more enterprising, forward-looking group which aimed at changing the status quo by introducing new ideas from abroad. Japanese failed heroes were not necessarily on the "conservative" or "reactionary" side. As he saw it, the true hero of the battle at Shimabara, for example, fought the forces of authority in order to improve an intolerable social situation. In most cases, however, they were not out of joint with the times and tended to associate themselves in allegiance, thought, and style of life with traditional Japanese ideals and patterns rather than with innovations and outside influences. It is no accident that Yorozu should have fought for a clan which had ancient connections with Shinto ceremonial and which bitterly opposed the introduction of a foreign religion.

As a staunch supporter of Japanese tradition, the hero will almost automatically espouse the imperial cause. Among the most illustrious of all Japan's heroes are those who supported the Emperor in the fourteenth century against the Shogun's vastly superior forces. It may seem strange therefore that Yorozu should have fought against the side which represented the Imperial Court and which included Umyado (Shōzoku Taishi) and most of the other imperial princes. Owing to their "marriage politics," the Sogas had recruited nearly the entire imperial family to their side, whereas after Prince Anahobe's death the Mononobes did not have the support of a single important member. Yet in the conflict between the Mononobes and the Sogas, as in so many clashes in subsequent Japanese history, it would seem that both sides regarded themselves as loyalist. Moriya and his adherents had no doubt believed that they were protecting the ancient Shinto, national traditions of the imperial family against the corrupting Buddhist innovations of the Sogas. At the time of the actual battle there was no reigning Emperor to give legitimacy to either side, and it was only the outcome of the fighting that determined who the real loyalists were. In the words of the old Japanese proverb, "Winners become the Imperial Army, losers become the rebels." This rather flexible concept of loyaltyism explains Yorozu's last lament in which he represented himself as "the Emperor's shield" (Shiriki no mitate). The hero could have had no specific Emperor in mind. By his final words (or rather, by the words that the compilers of the chronicle attributed to him) he was confirming his loyalty, not to any particular, individual sovereign, but to the ancient traditions of Japan as represented by the imperial family, and the fact that he happened to have been fighting against the most prominent members of this family made no difference. By losing the final battle the Mononobes and their supporters automatically became "rebels," as would of course have happened to the Sogas if they had been defeated. Yet Yorozu, the most impressive adherent of the Mononobe cause, is pictured as being a loyalist at heart, just like Senō Takamori who fought against the Imperial Army some thirteen centuries later and is nevertheless regarded as a loyalist hero. This existential loyalty was immediately recognized by the Court itself when they allowed Yorozu (and his dog) to be buried under a tomb, a privilege that could not conceivably have been granted to a mere rebel.