**Man'yoshu and the Imperial Imagination in Early Japan**, by Torquil Duthie.

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This book goes well beyond the Man’yōshū in its account of the ways in which the earliest Japanese texts imagined their world to be a universal empire whose comprehensible and comprehensive view of itself was oriented in time and space around the words and deeds of sovereigns. The chief focus is on the establishment of a new dynasty under Tenmu (621–686) after his victory in the Jinshin disturbance of 672. Insofar as his successors went on to create the institutions of an imperial state that would define it for centuries afterwards, Tenmu’s triumph has long been considered among the most consequential events in Japanese history, an impression that is reinforced by the lengthy attention it receives in the Nihon shoki. By attending to variant accounts of this event in that historical chronicle and other texts, including the Man’yōshū, Duthie highlights the multiplicity of narratives used to create a sense of community in the wake of that conflict, as well as the configurations of time and space through which the early Japanese court imagined itself more generally.

Five chapters in the first half of the book address several ways in which the early Japanese polity has been portrayed. Chapter One locates its genesis in the multipolar world that took shape in Northeast Asia from the third to sixth centuries when the textual heritage of the Han empire spread outwards after its political collapse to shape new polities in its former barbarian hinterlands. Early Japan, along with its three neighbors on the Korean peninsula and two in mainland China could now all cast themselves in its language of universal empire as either the civilized center or tributary periphery of “all under heaven” in their diplomatic dealings with one another. Chapter Two then turns to early Japan’s internal composition with a sweeping critique of scholarship that has taken the modern nation-state’s fantasy of a homogenous people and unchanging language as its point of departure for describing a classical precursor whose members were differentiated according to sovereign-centered hierarchies of lineage and rank, and whose language was a literary form fostered through multilingual exegesis.

Alternative views of this early Japanese empire are provided in Chapter Three by considering a constellation of titles for rulers that have been neglected in more tennō-centered histories, and by embracing scholarship on the ritual role played by palaces and calendars in creating imperial forms of space and time centered around sovereigns, an arrangement that is shown to also organize its reference works, legal codes, poetry, and histories. In order to be all-encompassing, this worldview had to accommodate conflicting
accounts of its past, as Chapter Four reveals by highlighting the very different views of Tenmu as legitimate successor, sibling rival, and disruptive rebel that can be found both within and among the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and *Kaifūsō*. Chapter Five illustrates an equally broad range of histories at work in the *Man'yōshū*’s multiple schemes for organizing its “myriad ages” of poetry into sovereign-centered geographies and genealogies, rather than the linear chronologies favored by modern evolutionary accounts of the anthology’s poetic styles and stages of compilation.

The five chapters making up the book’s second half engage in close readings of canonical poem sequences from the first two books of the *Man’yōshū* which memorialize Tenmu’s legacy. Chapter Six lays out a methodology by treating the anthology’s first six poems as examples of the ways in which the speaking subject in vernacular poetry is articulated through context and content rather than fixed grammatical rules. This fluidity enables what Duthie terms “a politics of first-person” in which the poem’s “I” also represents a “we” who declares collective subjection to the sovereign. Chapter Seven explores this collective identity in a famous sequence of poems by Hitomaro commemorating the excursions to Yoshino made by Tenmu’s successor Jitō (645–703). After surveying the politics informing modern literary criticisms that either identify with or reject the expressions of loyalty in these paens, Duthie shows how they combine first-person pledges with third-person descriptions of their speakers in order to imaginatively draw their audience at court into the spectacle of their own submission to the sovereign.

Similarly complex combinations of perspective are taken up in Chapter Eight’s discussion of Hitomaro’s famously distinctive dirges for two of Tenmu’s sons. The unusually impersonal opening to the elegy for Kusakabe (662–689) uses formulaic phrases shared with prayers and myths to describe Tenmu’s divine descent, before taking the audience from witnessing this past back to the present moment of mourning. The uniquely long elegy for Takechi (654–696) adds the Japanese poetic tradition’s one martial moment to this mythical language in a depiction of the Jinshin conflict that represents both sides through subtle shifts in the poem’s point of view. The focus then turns to the defeated in Chapter Nine’s reading of a sequence by Hitomaro, describing a journey to their former capital at Ōmi which marks this locale as a distant barbarian land that is only accessible to Jitō’s court through hearsay. Chapter Ten concludes with poems ending the first half of the first book that center on the accession of Tenmu’s grandson as Monmu (683–707), both by expressing a collective desire for his future reign in Hitomaro’s poems on the Aki fields and by later confirming his status as dynastic founder and divinity in a sequence celebrating the construction of a new palace at Fujiwara.

The many observations this book affords have the potential to enlarge our understanding of early Japan far beyond the seventh century that is its ostensible focus. Insofar as the iterations of the *Man’yōshū* and *Nihon shoki* that are available to us now were the product of glossing, editing, lectures and commentary in the ninth and tenth centuries, they can be said to represent a bundle of Heian imagined antiquities as much as those of earlier times. Duthie’s description of the *Man’yōshū*’s structural emphasis on royal geographies and genealogies thus helps us gain a greater appreciation, for example, of the ways in which the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different. In place of the imperial world-view informing its self-styled successor was distinctively different.
contained and ahistorical imagining of “all under heaven” as a realm in which the entirety of human time and space is enfolded within the eternally recurring cycle of seasons and royal rituals represented by the poems at both its beginning and its end.

Considerations of space make it impossible to do full justice to the wealth of issues, information, and insights that this extensively researched and erudite study has to offer. In addition to displaying a mastery of modern scholarship on the texts and historical issues he takes up, Duthie also provides singular insights of his own through a theoretically informed and linguistically nuanced application of narrative theory to early Japanese poetry. By highlighting the shared repertoire of figural and narrative devices evident in both the prose and poetry of this period, moreover, the author crosses modern disciplinary divisions between history and literature to arrive at a distinctively premodern definition of the “literary” as a form of cultural literacy grounded in a classical corpus. In these and many other respects, this book is a most welcome and important contribution to the burgeoning field of English-language scholarship on early Japan.

Reviewed by Gustav Heldt