

6. 須佐之男命の大蛇退治 “Susa-no-o-no-mikoto slays the eight-headed dragon, Yamata-no-Orochi”

Susa-no-o-no-mikoto was then expelled and descended to a place called Tori-kami¹, the upper reaches of Hi-River, Hi-no-kawa, in the province of Izumo. At that time, a pair of chopsticks² came floating down the river. Thinking that there must be some people living upstream, he walked up along the river looking for them.

He came up to a place, where an old man and an old woman were crying with a girl between them. He asked them, “Who are you?” And the old man replied, “I am a child of O-yama-tsu-mi-no-kami, an earthly deity. My name is Ashi-na-zuchi. My wife’s name is Te-na-zuchi, and our daughter’s name is Kushi-nada-hime.” “Why are you crying?” asked Susa-no-o-no-mikoto. Ashi-na-zuchi answered, “We originally had eight daughters. But the eight-headed dragon from Koshi came every year and ate the seven of them already. We are crying because it is time for the dragon to come again.” Susa-no-o-no-mikoto asked, “What does it look like?” He replied, “Its eyes are as red as winter cherries. It has one body with eight heads and eight tails. Moss, cypress, and cedar grow on its body. Its length spans eight valleys and eight mountains, and blood oozes out all the time from its belly.”

Then Haya-susa-no-o-no-mikoto said to the old man, “Will you give me your daughter (if I kill the dragon)?” The old man said, “You look respectful, but I do not know even your name.” He answered, “I am the brother of Ama-terasu-o-mi-kami and have just descended from the heavens.” With this answer, Ashi-na-zuchi and Te-na-zuchi-no-kami said, “We are truly humbled and honored to give our daughter to you.”

Then Haya-susa-no-o-no-mikoto transformed the maiden into a comb, Yutsu-tsuma-gushi³, and put it in one of the bunches of his hair. He said to Ashi-na-zuchi and Te-na-zuchi-no-kami, “Make strong sake by brewing it eight times, ‘Yashio-ori sake’⁴. Build a fence with eight gates, and make a platform at each gate. Then put a barrel filled with the strong sake on each platform, and wait for the eight-headed dragon to show up.”

They made the preparation as instructed, and waited. Soon, the eight-headed dragon made its appearance, as the old man had said. Putting a head into each barrel, it drank the sake, and got drunk, lay down, and slept.

Then Haya-susa-no-o-no-mikoto unsheathed the very long sword which he was wearing at his side, and cut the dragon into pieces, so that the Hi-River ran with its blood. When he cut the middle tail, the edge of his sword broke. Thinking it strange, he thrust the point of his sword in and cut the tail open, and there he found a great sword.

He took the sword out. Thinking that it was an extraordinary sword, he reported what happened to Ama-terasu-o-mi-kami and dedicated the sword to her. This sword is Kusa-nagi-no-turugi.⁵

Thereupon Haya-Susa-no-o-no-mikoto looked for a place to build a palace in the province of

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Izumo. Arriving at Suga, he said, “Coming here, I feel refreshed.” He built a palace in that place and lived there. Therefore that place is now called Suga, meaning ‘refreshed.’ When the great deity first built the Palace of Suga, clouds rose from there. He composed a poem, which said; Eightfold clouds rose in Izumo, / The clouds made the eightfold fences around it, / Where I built a palace for my wife to dwell,— / Oh, those eightfold fences!⁶ (Yakumo tatsu Izumo Yaegaki Tsuma gomi-ni Yaegaki tsukuru sono Yaegaki-wo)

Then he summoned Ashi-na-zuchi-no-kami and said, “You will be administrator of my palace,” and gave him the name Inada-no-miya-nushi-Suga-no-yatsu-mimi-no-kami.

Then Susa-no-o-no-mikoto got married to Kushi-nada-hime, and there was born a deity named Ya-shima-jinumi-no-kami.

Notes | 注釈

#1 There is a place called Tori-kami in Yokota-cho, where an iron refinery, Nittoho-tatara, is located. Mt. Torikami is also called Sentsu-san (1,143 m). The Kojiki does not say anything about the exact place where Susa-no-o-no-mikoto landed. Tori-kami can be either a place at the foot of the mountain or the top of the mountain. These kinds of ambiguities are everywhere in the Kojiki, and we can take them as they are without trying to make them clear. That is the world of myths in which there are many ambiguities which make the readers curious and make the myth more interesting.

#2 There is an argument concerning a pair of chopsticks floating down. Since the Hi-River’s upper stream was very narrow, a pair of chopsticks may not be able to float down without hitching on some twigs. Then what kind of chopsticks were floating down? One explanation goes as follows; people used a kind of tong-shaped chopstick made of bamboo in those days. This makes it easier to imagine the floating chopsticks. They sell this type of bamboo chopsticks at the Archaeological Museum of Kojindani, saying that these are the match making chopsticks of Susa-no-o-no-mikoto. There are some people who say that no tong-shaped chopsticks were found in any ancient tombs of the Kofun or Yayoi periods. Those who do not need chopsticks for their research say that there were no chopsticks, and those who need them say that there might have been. This kind of unreliability of interpretations may exist in the study of myth.

#3 ‘Yutsu’ means sacred, ‘tsuma’ means fingernail, so ‘Yutsu-tusma-gushi’ is a sacred fingernail-shaped comb.

#4 ‘Yashio-ori no sake” means very strong sake made by brewing eight times or many times. Almost all commentaries of the Kojiki say that the sake will become stronger and stronger when you brew it again and again. But actually, you cannot make sake stronger by brewing it many times. This is what I heard from Shyuji Horie, Doctor of Agriculture, who lives in Shimane prefecture. Every man knows his business best, so we’d better ask the specialist of sake to find out about brewing sake, and this shows how important an interdisciplinary approach is.

#5 Susa-no-o-no-mikoto’s sword was very long and strong (Totsuka-no-tsurugi), but the edge of his

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sword was broken when it touched the sword inside the dragon's tail. This incident made him think that the sword from the dragon's tail was much stronger and much greater than his. He decided to dedicate it to Ama-terasu-o-mi-kami. This dedication of the sword means surrender, and shows that Susa-no-o-no-mikoto asked Ama-terasu-o-mi-kami's forgiveness for his violence and bad manners in the Taka-ma-ga-hara. The sword was called Kusa-nagi-no-tsurugi, then Ame-no-murakumo-no-tsurugi, and then it is now enshrined at Atsuta shrine in Nagoya, and called Kusanagi-no-tsurugi there.

#6 Because it says that 'the great deity first built the palace of Suga,' so the Suga shrine is considered the first shrine in Japan. And the poem by Susa-no-o-no-mikoto is the first poem in the Kojiki, so it is considered the first Waka poem in Japan. And the Suga shrine is considered to be the birthplace of Waka poetry. There is a stone monument with the words 'the first shrine in Japan' inscribed on it. There is another stone monument there and the first Waka poem is inscribed on it. This shrine is very lucky having those 'the first' things, which people will talk about.

The story of 'Slaying eight-headed dragon' is finished here in the Kojiki, but in the Nihon-shoki the story goes on. Susa-no-o-no-mikoto starts his journey again to see his mother, leaving his wife and daughter.