

**Inventing a State Ceremony:
Ottmar von Mohl, Jinmu-tennō and the Proclamation of the Meiji Constitution
on February 11th 1889**

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The present paper aims to analyse the function and importance of ritual for the development of the modern Japanese state, with special consideration of the ceremonial promulgation of the Meiji Constitution on February 11th 1889. Particular focus will be on the visible tensions between western import and interpretations of ceremony on the one hand, and the seemingly traditional, religious and archaic Japanese roots of the state – centering around the figure of Jinmu-tennō –, on the other (cf. Antoni 2016: 205-214). Finally, the problem of the emergence of tradition itself and the power of political mythology will be discussed.

1. Introduction – Western and Japanese Thought in the Meiji Constitution

The year 1889 marked a turning point in the history of modern Japan, as the Japanese historian Kokaze Hidemasa (2011) points out. It was the series of ritual events and state ceremonies of that year which marked the end of the age of the Meiji Restoration and the birth of the modern Japanese state. At the center of these ritual state ceremonies stood the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution (大日本帝国憲法, *Dai-Nippon teikoku kenpō*) on February 11th 1889. Through this ceremonial event the empire of Japan was established as a modern constitutional monarchy, which could face the Western powers from an equal position. Since the restoration of the year 1868, the new Japanese empire had endeavoured to be recognised as equal to the European powers and the United States. The revision of the “unequal

treaties” in particular represented an ultimate goal of foreign policy efforts. However, a prerequisite for this was a structure of state corresponding to the international standards of the time, and the existence of a formal constitution was regarded of central importance. Under the leadership of the most influential Japanese statesman of his time, Itō Hirobumi (伊藤博文, 1841-1909), therefore, the text of what was to become the Meiji Constitution was drafted over several years.¹

European constitutional concepts served as models, and it is well known that foreign advisors (御雇, *oyatoi*) in the service of the Japanese government played a major role in the drafting of the constitution. These were, among others, the German constitutional lawyers Albert Mosse (1846-1925) and Hermann Roesler (1834-1894). Their work demonstrates the significant proportion of western thought in the construction of the modern Japanese constitution. Therefore the importance of foreign contributions to the development of the Meiji Constitution is usually highly emphasised among international researchers.

But in its essential ideological core the Meiji Constitution was based not only on western thinking, but also on “traditionalistic” ideas, i.e. Japanese political and religious thought, especially with regard to the position of the *tennō* as it had been designed around the Meiji Restoration in accordance with nativist and Shintō concepts of the ideal state (cf. Antoni 2016: 205-206).

In the Meiji Constitution the position of the emperor was above all other political entities, defined as holy, absolute and unlimited, by virtue of his divine descent. The emperor ruled the country and the people by uniting both the executive and legislative powers within himself. However, according to chapter IV (articles 55-56) of the constitution, the emperor was not accountable for political decisions, since it was his ministers’ duty to advise the emperor and take responsibility for their advice. In chapter II (article 28) the freedom of religious belief was declared “within limits”, which was to say, as long as the religion in question did not contradict the imperial position and (Shrine) Shintō – a clause aimed directly at Christianity. The religious sect Shintō was given no rights as a state religion under the Meiji Constitution. The only religion considered to be of political relevance was the worship of the emperor.²

The Meiji Constitution, which was highly influenced by Prussian constitutional law, accorded the emperor a sacred, inviolable position that was exempt from any responsibility and thus followed the traditions of the nativist schools in premodern Japan. But the document also contained elements aiming at the prevention of imperial despotism.³ Thus, the constitution in fact was the product of competing interests and ideas in Meiji-era Japan, located between the two poles of the political

¹ On the drafting process of various versions of the constitution cf. Hardacre (1989: 115-121).

² For the original text of the Meiji Constitution cf. Itō (1906), Hasegawa et al. (1991: 203 ff.); for a detailed discussion of the constitution cf. Beasley (1989: 663 ff.). See also Itō (1906).

³ Cf. Meiji Constitution, article 4: “The Emperor is the head of the Empire, combining in Himself the rights of sovereignty, and exercises them, according to the provisions of the present Constitution.” (Itō 1906: 7) Article 5: “The Emperor exercises the legislative power with the consent of the Imperial Diet.” (Itō 1906: 10) Johannes Ueberschaar (1912: 14) uses the term “limited Constitutionalism” to refer to this form of constitution.

mythology based on Shintō and its ideas concerning the Land of the Gods, and contemporary western thought on constitutional law, which in itself was divided into liberal and conservative concepts.

The sovereign position of the emperor was established primarily in articles 1 and 3 of the constitution.⁴ Article 1 reads: “The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal.” (Itō 1906: 2) In article 3 this principle was made more precise: “The Emperor is sacred and inviolable.” (Itō 1906: 6)⁵ In his “Imperial Oath at the Sanctuary of the Imperial Palace” (憲法告文, *kenpō kokubun*) on the occasion of the promulgation of the constitution the emperor clarified this basic idea by explaining the following principles:

We, the Successor to the prosperous Throne of Our Predecessors, do humbly and solemnly swear to the Imperial Founder of Our House and to Our other Imperial Ancestors that, in pursuance of a great policy co-extensive with the Heavens and with the Earth, We shall maintain and secure from decline the ancient form of government.⁶

This basic concept rooted in the idea of a direct and uninterrupted line of ancestry to the alleged founder of imperial Japan in the mythical past: Jinmu-tennō 神武天皇. In spite of modern historical and archaeological research having proven the absolute fictivity of this so-called Jinmu-tennō – known in the sources only by his personal name Iware-biko 伊波礼北古 – and consequently also of the entire foundation myth of the Japanese state, modern Japan, from the Meiji period (1868-1912) until the end of World War II, took these mythical events for granted, officially regarding them as true historical facts.

The early years of the Meiji period even witnessed the emergence of a veritable Jinmu cult. A question of particular importance in this context was the establishment of an exact date for the ostensible founding of the empire by Jinmu. Thus, in the year 1872, following a governmental decision based on the ancient sources, the date of the day of foundation of the early Japanese Empire was officially set to February 11th 660 BCE. This date also formed the basis for a new national holiday introduced in the same year, the “National Foundation Day” (紀元節, *kigensetsu*), and it later also became the date for the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889.

The fact that the Meiji Constitution of 1889 was proclaimed on February 11th, therefore, had a deep symbolic meaning. With this date, the proclamation of the constitution – and with it the entire modern Japanese Empire – was, in terms of ceremony, directly linked to Jinmu-tennō as the founder of the imperial line. Jinmu-tennō was accepted as the historical founding figure who had descended in direct line from the divine ancestors with the Sun-Goddess Amaterasu as their ultimate

⁴ Ienaga (1967) provides a comprehensive discussion of the Meiji Constitution; see also Röhl (1963). “100th anniversary of the Meiji Constitution: State, society and culture in Japan during the Meiji period” was the topic of an academic symposium in 1989, the results of which were published in the journal *Oriens Extremus* (vol. 33/1, 1990).

⁵ Cf. Wittig (1976: 87, doc. 26) and Miyazawa (1986: 291).

⁶ Cited by Itō (1906: 167).

origin.⁷ It was from this figure that the modern imperial state emerged ideologically. Through the selection of this day for the promulgation of the constitution the basic ideas of the Japanese “national polity” (国体, *kokutai*) found their way directly into the ceremonial festivity for the promulgation of the constitution.⁸

Therefore, the present paper addresses the twofold aspects of the date, the ceremonial events of 1889 on the one hand, and the meaning and historic analysis of the date of Jinmu-tennō’s foundation in 660 BCE on the other. We will begin with an evaluation of the promulgation ceremony, which symbolically showed the European influence in detail. This “western” design of the festivities’ programme of February 11th 1889 was the responsibility of the Ministry of the Imperial Household (宮内庁, *kunaichō*) which was headed by the very statesman who had already played a major role in the drafting of the constitutional text: Itō Hirobumi. To support this task, foreign advisors had been hired, who were to contribute to the design of state ceremonies by introducing equivalent European models. One of these western advisors was the German diplomat Ottmar von Mohl (1846-1922) who stayed in Tōkyō in the service of the Ministry of the Imperial Household for two years (1887-1889) responsible for the transmission of Prussian and other European court ceremonials into the ceremonial regulations of the Meiji Imperial House.

2. Ottmar von Mohl and the promulgation of the constitution

Born in 1846 as a son of the famous expert in constitutional law and professor of political science, Robert von Mohl (1799-1875), in the university town of Tübingen, von Mohl attended law schools in Bonn, Heidelberg and Munich graduating with a doctoral degree from Heidelberg University (Mohl 1921: 15) before he entered the diplomatic service and became an attaché at the Foreign Office in Berlin in 1870. This was followed by positions as cabinet secretary for Empress Augusta and consulate offices in Cincinnati and St. Petersburg (Mohl 1921: 103, 158 and 162). From 1887 to 1889 von Mohl, accompanied by his family, stayed in Tōkyō as an adviser to the Imperial Household Ministry and the imperial court. His duty was to advise members of the Japanese court in questions of European etiquette and ceremonial and thus help to modernise the court according to Western models. His wife Wanda von Mohl (née Countess von der Groeben, 1854-1910) also served at the imperial court as a court lady of Empress Shōken (証券皇太后, *Shōken-kōtaigō*, 1849-1914). In 1904, fifteen years after their return from Japan, von Mohl published memoirs of his service in Tōkyō under the title *Am japanischen Hofe* (“At the Japanese Court”). In 79 more or less detailed chapters he recounted his and his wife’s experiences in Japan. These recollections are based on entries taken from the diary he had kept during his stay in Japan. In addition to descriptions of his duties as an advisor to the Imperial Household Ministry, as well as to Itō Hirobumi and his successor Hijikata Hisamoto (土方久元, 1833-1918), von Mohl particularly provides detailed accounts of life at the Japanese imperial court of the time.

⁷ On the “Jinmu-tennō revival” in Meiji-Japan cf. Wachutka (2013: 11 ff. (chapter 1.2.)).

⁸ On the historical evolution of the *kokutai* concept, the National Polity of Japan, cf. e.g. Antoni (2016).

2.1 Ottmar von Mohl's duties at court

It is interesting to note, as it is revealed in the first sections of his memoirs, how substantial von Mohl estimated the impact to have been that Germany, and especially the German advisors and thus probably also himself, had had on the Japanese modernisation process. He thus notes in this context:

It was a strange discovery for the Japanese that in Europe a country like the German Reich existed, where the sciences and arts flourished, state administration and the court worked perfectly, the army was world-famous, and whose constitution was of a strong monarchical character.

[...] The Japanese government now began to see German scholars, officials and officers as appropriate teachers, more than the American, British and French advisors. (Mohl 1904: 9 and 11)

Von Mohl's task was, in fact, to educate Nagasaki Michinori (長崎省吾, Nagasaki Shōgo, 1850/52-1937), the imperial master of ceremonies and private secretary to the Minister of the Imperial Household (called "House Minister" by von Mohl), in daily lessons on the institutions and rules of conduct of the Prussian court. In addition to the personal experiences von Mohl had collected himself as a Royal Prussian chamberlain, he used as textbooks in particular the *Royal Prussian Court and State Manual* as well as the *Book of Ceremonies of the Prussian Court* by Rudolf von Stillfried-Alcántara (Stillfried-Alcantára 1877). Since von Mohl did not master Japanese and Nagasaki spoke no German, relevant sections of the templates were initially discussed and translated into English by von Mohl, and subsequently written down by the Japanese master of ceremonies in a Japanese version (Mohl 1904: 56-57). In the beginning the lessons consisted mostly of a general introduction to the institutions of the Prussian court and the state. Later on individual court and etiquette rules increasingly became the focus of their attention.

As no English version of von Mohl's book exists so far, a longer quotation on the subject should be acceptable:

The *Royal Prussian Court and State Manual*, the *Book of Ceremonies of the Prussian Court* by Stillfried and individual sections of the book of Malortie *The Lord Steward (Der Hofmarschall)* served as a basis, to which Hermann Schulze's *The House Laws of the German Royal Houses* was added later. Every morning around 10am I would arrive at the above-mentioned *bureau de palais* [...], and promptly my assistant ["Adlatus"] Michinori S. Nagasaki, who was the private secretary to the House Minister and imperial master of ceremonies, would appear to work with me. First we went through the general arrangements of the Prussian court and state with the relevant chapters of the *Court and State Manual*. I translated and explained its contents to Nagasaki in English, who would translate that which he had heard and, as I hope, correctly understood into Japanese and put it on paper as a draft. Individual chapters were again taken from the *Book of Ceremonies of the Prussian Court*, such as the mourning regulations or those on wearing decorations, which formed a constant preoccupation of the Japanese, who are highly concerned with matters of medals and decorations. We worked in this manner almost every day until half-past twelve at noon. [...]

In the afternoon, the sections worked on in the morning would carefully be transferred into Japanese by Nagasaki, provided with large Chinese headings and processed into a substantial book by the offices, which would finally be submitted to the *tennō* for his information by the House Minister. The House Minister was not only interested in the organisation of the court, but also in the departmental structure of military and civilian cabinets, the position of the home ministry *vis-à-vis* the lord steward's office, the audit office, the state ministry; the names, purposes and tasks of the supreme, superior and high royal courts, the organisation of the courts of their majesties and of those of the other members of the royal family; the positions and roles of the court ladies, the maids and servants; the education of the royal princes and princesses and many questions from the area of the royal private family law, as those concerning primogeniture, apanages and equalities. The Japanese court was especially interested in questions of financial law, such as the transfer of property in imperial ownership to the Japanese state, specification of a civil list for the emperor, the income of the empress, the share of the princes and princesses in the family properties [*fideicommissum*], the possible establishment of a court tax chamber, a court treasury, a casket management [Schatullverwaltung], the control of the court's statements of account by the Japanese audit office after the Prussian model, the level of salaries for court officials and all employees of the court. Quite incomprehensible appeared to them the countless unpaid honorary positions at our courts; that supreme, superior and court officials and chamberlains would serve, as it is mostly the case among us, in honorary offices without remuneration, did not make sense to the Japanese, but they liked this system, as corresponding with their traditional beliefs, very much.

Also about subjects which, strictly speaking, belong to the field of state law, such as the organisation of the state council, the participation of the princes of the house in its meetings as well as constitutional issues, such as the composition of [the House of Lords or] the first chambers in Germany, explanations were requested and prememorials [*promemorias*] had to be written. In the course of two years a true bulk of literature, which is likely to be buried in the archives of the home minister in Tōkyō today, thus emerged, topic by topic, on the issues addressed. The knowledge I had gathered since my youth in conversations with my highly revered late father, Robert von Mohl, at my parents' house, were very beneficial to me. [...] (Mohl 1904: 56-59)

In addition to dealing with such fundamental issues, current events repeatedly demanded ceremonial rules for special occasions. One event that was explicitly choreographed in accordance with the German model was the birthday celebration of the Japanese emperor. In line with the celebration of the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm I, von Mohl was asked for an accurate ceremony following the same model (Mohl 1904: 119). Thanks to his own experience and the help of the corresponding chapter in the *Book of Ceremonies*, von Mohl participated in the preparations to celebrate the birthday of the emperor on November 3rd 1887, which was conducted for the first time and based, at least in large parts, on the German model.⁹

⁹ Cf. Mohl (1904: 129-132) and the chapter on the detailed programme for the birthday celebrations for Emperor Wilhelm in Stillfried-Alcantara (1877: 31-35).

2.1.1. Dispute with Itō Hirobumi about tradition

Although in charge of modernising the court etiquette, von Mohl always emphasised his great sympathy for the traditional culture of Japan. He did not, however, go beyond a certain romanticism in this respect. On the design of his office in the premises of the Ministry (chapter 8) he notes, for example:

[...] the fact that this particular work space exuded all the charm of an old Japanese environment contributed greatly to increase my regret that all of this charm would vanish by introducing modern European institutions. My feelings were very conflicting. On the one hand the beautiful, artistically consummate old Japan with its millennia-old traditions and customs of most picturesque character, on the other hand the need, as far as the intercourse with other countries demanded, to abolish or modernise these customs. (Mohl 1904: 54)

Of special importance in this context was the question of correct and adequate attire of the courtiers during official ceremonial events. Although wearing Western clothing in Japan had, in principle, been prescribed for official occasions already since 1872, there were still no uniform provisions for the selection of clothes for specific court festivities and receptions, nor for the design of the costumes of court personnel.¹⁰ In this context it is very revealing that von Mohl pointed to a confrontation with the House Minister Itō on this very question, who vehemently rejected the approach advocated by von Mohl that women should wear Japanese costumes at court festivities. While von Mohl regretted this fact, the House Minister was determined to insist on European clothing, because, as von Mohl cites him “in Japan the costume issue is a larger political issue, about which the House Ministry is not permitted to decide”.¹¹

On Itō Hirobumi’s strict resistance in this context von Mohl (1904: 21-22) notes:

I may allow myself to remark here that Count Itō’s views, like those of many other of the new Japanese statesmen, were much more radical than our own, that he wanted to do away with some of the old customs, habits and institutions, or had already begun to abolish them, which we could not agree with. Thus, for example, it had unfortunately already been decided and sanctioned before we arrived in Japan that the traditional Japanese costumes for court festivities should be discarded. The explanations we often received in this regard so little correspond to the facts that the very opposite seems closer to the truth. The picturesque female court dress, which to an ancient Japanese imperial court signifies a piece of history and a cherished habit and to the court ladies confidence in (their) appearance, had already been abandoned by a proclamation of the empress to the women of Japan and replaced with the banal European costume; for every artist and lover of artistic effects a much greater pain since in Europe a movement is growing that strives to revive these very historical habits and the usage of the old costumes in a decorative style at courts. But as we will see later, there was absolutely nothing to do about it with Count Itō in this case; and this was one point in which his political acumen

¹⁰ On the introduction of Western dress at official occasions cf. Zöllner (2006: 206).

¹¹ Mohl (1904: 122). Cf. also Mohl (1921: 184-185).

failed him because the costume question subsequently turned out disadvantageous to him with regard to the public opinion.

It is apparent that on this issue, there obviously existed a fundamental disagreement between von Mohl and his supervisor, Itō Hirobumi, who strictly refused all traditional Japanese ceremonial aspects within the modern court ceremonies to thereby demonstrate the position of Japan as a modern state, on an equal footing with the major European powers of its time.

2.2 *The celebrations*

Ottmar von Mohl was either not modest enough to see his own role at the imperial court as that of a mere advisor, or the Japanese accounts of this time were not generous enough to give him due credit. Although, as we will point out again below, Japanese sources hardly mention him and other European advisors, von Mohl frequently stressed his own importance and personal contribution to the process of introducing modern court etiquette to Meiji Japan. This is especially true for the major national event of the constitutional promulgation on February 11th 1889.¹²

2.2.1 The planning

The most notable event of von Mohl's entire work was the solemn proclamation of the Japanese constitution on February 11th 1889, which von Mohl not only attended, but which, according to his memoirs, he had largely designed by himself.

The planning of this event had taken the members of the Home Ministry weeks to complete as von Mohl reported (1904: 220). He himself was entrusted with the duty to plan the programme "in accordance with the patterns of similar celebrations as they often occurred in Berlin in recent years" (ibid.). Above all, the following points had to be clarified: the general course of the event and the appropriate place for the solemn reading of the constitution, further the question of access by newspaper correspondents of foreign countries and the hoisting of the flag at the imperial palace (ibid.). It is unfortunate that von Mohl provides but a superficial and unspecified view of his mission, not clarifying, for instance, which elements of the event had actually been taken from the German model.

In his memoirs, he writes about the process of preparing the *Programme for the Celebration of the Constitutional Proclamation* (ch. 73):

We started to inspect the new *palais* more eagerly and to design the plan for the prospective constitutional proclamation and inauguration of the first Japanese parliament. (Mohl 1904: 219)

[...] I was entrusted with the task of designing a programme for the court. This programme for the constitutional proclamation was designed follow-

¹² The seventh volume of the official historiographic work of the Meiji era (*Meiji-tennō-ki* (明治天皇紀, "Chronicles of the Meiji-tennō") lists the events around the promulgation of the constitution in detail; for February 11th see vol. 7: 204-218, for February 12th see vol. 7: 218-221.

ing the pattern of similar celebrations as they had often occurred in Berlin in recent years, and the corresponding draft of the Ministry of the Imperial Household found the approval of the *tennō*. (Mohl 1904: 220)

For the celebration itself February 11th, the anniversary of the accession of Jimmu-tennō, had been chosen, i.e. the founding of the Japanese monarchy. (Mohl 1904: 220)

Reading this and other passages of his memoirs, one gets the idea that it was mainly von Mohl himself who was responsible for the key decisions. According to his writing, it was also him who was responsible for some classical Japanese parts of the programme, which were included against the will of Itō Hirobumi. As we have seen, Itō strictly rejected any traditional Japanese ceremonial parts within the modern court ceremonies, wishing to demonstrate in that way that Japan was a modern state now, equal to the great European powers of its time.

2.2.2 The “Shintō ritual”

The ceremonies of the constitutional proclamation in the morning of February 11th were divided into two separate, consecutive parts. First, the *tennō* in a Shintō rite reported to the imperial ancestors and the deities of heaven the fact that the Japanese Empire now had at its disposal a formal constitution.¹³ Carol Gluck summarises this part of the whole ceremony as follows:

Earlier that morning the emperor had performed another ritual in the palace, this time at the inner sanctuaries and clothed in ancient court dress. For the promulgation of the new law of state had been scheduled to coincide with the 2549th anniversary of the legendary founding of the empire, the holiday known as *kigensetsu*. Along with the traditional Shinto offerings to his imperial ancestors, the emperor brought news of the Constitution. In his oath he reported the desirability of such a law “in consideration of the progressive tendency of the course of human affairs and in parallel with the advance of civilization.” At the same time he assured the ancestors that this was to the end of preserving the ancient form of government bequeathed by them to the country. After the emperor had placated the ancestral spirits, a Shinto priest delivered the same message to the “myriad gods” at the palace shrine. All that remained was for the imperial messengers, who had previously been dispatched, to report to Ise shrine and to the graves of two special ancestors, the founding Emperor Jimmu and Meiji’s father, Emperor Kōmei, who had reigned before him. Thus were the nation’s notables and also the gods duly notified of Japan’s new Constitution. The forms of ceremony were revealing. (Gluck 1985: 43)

Ottmar von Mohl also mentioned this part of the ceremony in his notes of the day, calling it the “Shintō service”, however only very briefly and without giving any details of the ritual.

The celebration started with a Shintō service at the imperial ancestral temple in the *palais* garden. The emperor, as always on such occasions

¹³ On this topic cf. *Meiji-tennō-ki* (vol. 7: 204-206).

clothed in white silk robes as were all of his surroundings, took the oath on the constitution and asked for the blessings of his ancestors for the new constitution. [...] ¹⁴

2.2.3 The state ceremony

His short description of the “Shintō service” marks a sharp contrast to the detailed report of the state ceremony, which followed immediately after the Shintō ritual. Providing an exact timetable von Mohl records every detail of the event, describing in particular the proceedings and, again and again, the various clothes and dresses of the people present, as the following excerpt illustrates. The description gives a vivid insight into the course of this historical ceremony:

Thereupon [i.e. directly after the ceremony mentioned above] the emperor, now dressed in a European uniform, proceeded together with the court in a solemn procession to the magnificent throne room especially prepared for this purpose where the empress and the princesses of the house had already taken position to the right of the throne, the princes and, behind them, the diplomatic corps to the left. The *tennō* then read the proclamation on the conferment of the constitution to the Japanese people from his throne in a loud, clear voice. The hall offered an impressive sight. *Vis-à-vis* the emperor stood in long rows the highest authorities and most prominent personalities of Japan, those subjects which make up the upper and lower houses. The empress, to the right of the emperor, was seated on a slightly raised dais together with the princesses and the ladies of the entourage. She wore a European diamond tiara and a matching *rivière* (collier) to a pink evening dress; she and the surrounding princesses were decorated with Japanese ladies’ medals. This group of princely women and elegant appearances provided a very nice impression. The gentlemen of the court had been placed behind their majesties along the walls of the hall. The diplomatic corps, in rare completeness, with its colorful uniforms and costumes enlivened the picture. The emperor himself was dressed in a field marshal’s uniform decorated with Japanese medals. When he had finished his speech under the silent attention of the very large assembly, the Japanese national anthem played by several military bands resounded from the *palais* garden, separated from the inside of the throne room only by large glass walls; the thunder of the gun salute by the Japanese warships located in the ports of Yokohama and Tōkyō merged with the fire of the artillery which gave 101 rounds in Tōkyō. Under these solemn impressions the emperor left the throne room and withdrew until the beginning of the parade, which was scheduled for 1 o’clock. [...]

At 1 o’clock the emperor and empress went to the parade ground for the first time driving in a new state gala carriage drawn by six horses à la Daumont, with outriders all in the new gala liveries. [...] In the afternoon there was a break because the large court dinner in several rooms of the new castle was announced for 7pm. In the actual dining hall 120 people dined with their majesties; the other 280 guests were divided into four rooms with an imperial prince presiding at each of these four tables and

¹⁴ “Chapter 76, *Proclamation of the Constitution on February 11th 1889*” (Mohl 1904: 222).

welcoming the guests in a very polite manner at the beginning of the dinner on behalf of the emperor. [...]

At 9pm a very interesting presentation of the ancient imperial court orchestra started in the throne room. A *hautpas* had been built for the emperor and empress, on which the latter sat down, dressed in a white and golden robe with the large European diamond tiara, after having welcomed the diplomatic corps like the *tennō* had before her. *Vis-à-vis* the court, along the windows, a low stage had been erected on which a-thousand-year-old dances were performed by court dancers in picturesque costumes to equally old strident melodies. According to the verdict of all the people present this idea had a very special appeal and pleased the audience wonderfully as [something] unseen before. I had the silent satisfaction of having argued some time ago to retain the imperial conservatory of court music and court dances since now they were presented so beautifully.

Of particular interest was the religious “No” dance, in which old costumes and weapons from Kyōto were used.

After a few more interesting performances and dances, which were only disturbed to some extent because the windows of the hall had been opened, so that the ladies in their low-cut dresses complained about the cold and the unscreened stearin candles dripped on the gala uniforms, the court withdrew. The buffets in the large dining room and the adjoining smaller salons and galleries were opened; the brightly lit Japanese rooms with golden ceilings and laquered doors offered a magnificent sight. For a long time the numerous groups of people remained in animated conversation at the *palais*, among them the Lords von Wildenbruch and Ilgner in their Prussian uniforms.

[... February 12th] The [ordinary] people were also to have their share [in the festivities]; and therefore it had been planned for the imperial couple to go on a tour through the city of Tōkyō heading to the Uen(n)o park.¹⁵ Numerous triumphal arches had been built along the way the emperor would pass, and hundreds of thousands of people stood respectfully on either side of the imperial path. Everything went as desired and their majesties jointly presented themselves to their loyal subjects. It had not been the custom until now that the emperor and the empress would drive in the same car exposed to the eyes of the public so here as well was a discontinuation of the customs and habits of the imperial court. [...]

The following day the whole celebration of the proclamation was discussed in detail in a long conversation with the House Minister Hijikata and all small errors that had occurred were highlighted so that they could be avoided in the future.

Until the end of February there was daily work in the House Ministry on an account of the coronation at Königsberg since the Japanese court also wished to have a model of this for possible future use.¹⁶

¹⁵ On this topic cf. also *Meiji-tennō-ki* (vol 7: 218).

¹⁶ “Chapter 76, *Proclamation of the Constitution on February 11th 1889*” (Mohl 1904: 222-228).

2.2.4 The assassination of Mori Arinori

As Babicz (2014: 29) points out, the ceremonial events of the day generally were “a great success”. But a single tragic event, happening in the morning of February 11th, darkened the day considerably: the assassination of the Minister of Education, Mori Arinori (森有礼, 1847-1889). Mori, an explicitly “westernised” politician of Meiji Japan, was stabbed by a fanatic Shintō adherent, when he was heading to the promulgation ceremony. He died from his injuries the following day, February 12th. The murder had an explicitly religious background since Mori's murderer, Nishino Buntarō (西野文太郎, 1865-1889) had already accused him of sacrilege against the imperial Grand Shrine in Ise in the year 1887.¹⁷

Ottmar von Mohl mentions this incident in his memoirs in two ways. On the one hand he is fully aware of the political dimension of this tragic event in regard to the promulgation ceremony, on the other he also seems to be personally shocked since Mori Arinori was his direct neighbour at home, his house being adjacent to Mori's estate. Hence, von Mohl recorded this incident:

[February 11th] When the guests had gradually withdrawn from the throne room, the incredible announcement was made that on the same morning the Minister of Education, Viscount Mori, who had been about to go to the palace to attend the Shintō worship, had been stabbed by a fanatic priest. [...] As an explanation it was rumoured among Japanese circles that Minister Mori, who had been educated in America, had garnered the wrath of the Shintō priests of the Temple of Ise because he had entered the sanctuary with his boots and lifted the protective curtain with his walking stick.¹⁸ [...]

This act made an especially deep impression on us, however, because our house was directly adjacent to Viscount Mori's estate. Yet our poor neighbour survived this day, so the festivities did not need to be interrupted, although the murder attack cast a gloomy shadow over the celebration. (Mohl 1904: 224)

On February 12th at 5am, Minister Viscount Mori died and his death darkened the otherwise successful celebration of the constitutional proclamation. (Mohl 1904: 227)

[February 12th] On the evening of the same day a big party was celebrated at the prime minister, Count Kuroda's, [house] which had, on my advice, not been cancelled due to Mori's death because of the high political importance of these days. (Mohl 1904: 228)

Interestingly, the assassin of Mori Arinori, Nishino Buntarō, son of a samurai from the Chōshū domain, later received enormous sympathy among the public and the press in Japan. He was praised for his idealism. “Upon public request his remains were disinterred from the Aoyama cemetery and given a proper Shinto funeral” (Babicz

¹⁷ For the course of events regarding the assassination of Mori Arinori cf. the *Meiji-tennō-ki* (vol 7: 216-218); see also the descriptions in Babicz (2014: 29-31) and Keene (2002: 423).

¹⁸ For a discussion of this topic cf. Keene (2002: 423) and Babicz (2014: 29-31).

2014: 30). Mori on the other hand was in retrospect accused of being a man affecting Western manners. Babicz (2014: 31) concludes on this incident:

These reactions to Mori's death were not anecdotal. They were expressing widespread feelings and ideas, and were in deep harmony with the new chapter opened by the promulgation of the Constitution. [...] The fact that Mori's life ended one day after modern Japan was officially born, amid applause for his murderer, was symbolic of the end of an epoch, that of old enlightened Meiji nationalism and the beginning of a new age, which would eventually lead to expansionism, militarism, war, and disaster.

What is perfectly clear through the events of these few days is the fact that the birth of modern Japan during the late years of the Meiji period rested on two cornerstones, the constitutional foundation of the state on the one hand, and the political mythology of (State) Shintō on the other. We will deal with this second aspect after turning to some concluding remarks on Ottmar von Mohl and his role within this process.

2.3 Conclusion: *The work of Ottmar von Mohl*

Regardless of the actual influence Ottmar von Mohl may have had in his capacity as an advisor and consultant to the Japanese imperial court, his record of his two-year stay in Japan has become a valuable historical source since he gives detailed information about his life at the imperial court. His reports and pictures of everyday life at the imperial court characteristically make up a considerable part of the book and are generally much more accurate than those of his actual employment and work as a consultant at the House Ministry.

Of particular interest for the reader in this context are the descriptions of daily life at the imperial court in which von Mohl could participate as a direct observer in certain circumstances and events. As advisor to the House Ministry he had access to official events and courtly celebrations, which strangers were usually not allowed to attend, and thus he came into contact with numerous leading figures of the time, enabling him to convey detailed "insider information". One example is his account of the annual ceremony of the rice harvest festival at the imperial court. Von Mohl was allowed to participate as a spectator and he writes about this celebration:

The great annual thanksgiving and offering festival for rice crops took place on November 23rd. This festival is one of those old Japanese religious court festivities, which so vividly express the traditional position of the *tennō* as ecclesiastical leader of the nation. These festivals are always held in the temple built within the enclosing walls of the imperial parks, located very close to the castle and dedicated to the worship of Shintō, the imperial house religion of the ancestors. Strangers never had access and when the writer of these lines was caused to attend as a spectator, this happened as a result of his membership to the imperial household. (Mohl 1904: 139)

Although von Mohl's self-assessment here, describing himself as a member of the imperial court, is probably exaggerated, his detailed description following this introduction allows revealing insights into the course of the ceremony.¹⁹

Irene Hardach-Pinke makes an interesting remark in this context about the general peculiarity of the writings of individual Meiji Germans, which is also applicable to von Mohl's records. Since most Germans did not learn the Japanese language during their stay in Japan, their reports have mainly been restricted to visual impressions of, among other things, "the scenic beauty of Japan, the inside of the houses and hotels [...], the colors of the clothes, the dignity of the temples and shrines [and] the elegance of craftsmanship" (1987: 93).

While a majority of Ottmar von Mohl's reports therefore consist of his visual descriptions of the country, they simultaneously reflect a Eurocentric perspective, that is a perception of images and patterns that were associated with Japan in Europe at that time. While Japan was rated as backward on the one hand, as opposed to the supposedly disciplined and enlightened western nations, it was regarded as very well viable on the other hand and particularly its cultural achievements were noticed with appreciative fascination.

Ottmar von Mohl himself regarded his publication, which he compiled and published only many years after his stay in Japan as a "contribution to the cultural and historical epoch of Europeanisation of Japan, which was carried out in the eighties of the last century [...]"²⁰ While – seen from today's perspective – his review has to be scrutinised critically with regards to language and content, it still aptly reflects both von Mohl's self-perception and the role that he ascribed to Europe within the Japanese modernisation process.

The preparation of the celebration programme for the proclamation of the constitution was one of the last tasks von Mohl had to perform at the Japanese imperial court. Since his appointment had been agreed to last for only two years and a renewal of the contract was not requested by the Japanese side, von Mohl and his family had to leave Japan in early April 1889. The position of a western consultant in the Japanese House Ministry was not filled again (Mohl 1904: 206; 231). This was in accordance with Japan's official governmental policy to limit foreign advice to the point where Japanese specialists were able to fulfill the respective tasks. The historian Kokaze Hidemasa mentioned above states in this respect: "The promulgation of the Meiji Constitution on 11 February 1889 [...] served to demonstrate to the Western powers that Japan was now a modern state" (2011: 119). But Kokaze does not even mention von Mohl's part in this process, except for one case when citing a passage from von Mohl's memoirs concerning the status of the empress (without mentioning in this context the role of von Mohl's wife Wanda von der Groeben): "The model for the empress was none other than Augusta, the German empress and Prussian princess." (Kokaze 2011: 125) This shows that Kokaze is well aware of the existence

¹⁹ Cf. Mohl (1904: 139-142).

²⁰ From the preface of Mohl (1904).

of von Mohl's memoirs, which had been translated into Japanese in 1988, with a new paperback edition in 2011.²¹ An English translation of his work is still missing.²²

In the same way as Kokaze, Lionel Babicz (2014) in his essay "February 11, 1889: The Birth of Modern Japan" too does not even mention the role of Western models for the promulgation ceremony. Needless to say that he also does not mention Ottmar von Mohl in this context at all. The existence of "foreigners employed by the government (*oyatoi gaikokujin*)" (Babicz 2014: 26) is addressed in just one single sentence recounting that those people, as well as some journalists, "were also allowed to witness (*haiken*) the ceremony" (l.c.).

Von Mohl himself expressed some frustration in this respect in his memoirs, since he was dismissed, as we have seen, from service at the imperial court soon after the ceremonial events of February 11th, 1889. His name was never again mentioned in Japan.²³

3. On the ideological context of the promulgation ceremonial

As indicated in the introduction, the constitution and its proclamation combine two diametrically opposed positions representing a "Western" and a "Japanese" part respectively. Ottmar von Mohl represents the foreign influence, while the Japanese aspect is present in the figure of Jinmu-tennō and both are joined together in the day and date of the promulgation, February 11th 1889. This second aspect will be examined in the next section followed by a discussion of the credibility of traditions in this context.

3.1 *The year 1889 in Meiji Japan*

In Lionel Babicz's contribution to the topic (2014) he states that it was the day of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution "which was to mark the official birth of a 'civilized' Japan" (p. 22). Highly interesting in our context, he continues: "This was the emergence of a new political system based on national mythology and fervent patriotism, but also on the rule of law." (ibid)²⁴

²¹ Cf. Kanamori (2011). The sole academic research on Ottmar von Mohl in Japanese is the work of Richard Szimpl (2002), who provides a overview of von Mohl's life and work in Japan according to the work *At the Japanese Court* (Mohl 1904).

²² In English language research von Mohl seems completely unknown until now, which is in sharp contrast to his German contemporary at the Meiji court, Erwin von Baelz (1849-1913), whose descriptions of court life are widely cited in English publications (cf. e.g. Fujitani 1998: 77); for Baelz's account of the promulgation ceremony cf. for example Keene (2002: 422) and Babicz (2014: 26).

²³ Needless to say that the official historiography, *Meiji-tennō-ki*, in its chapter on the promulgation of the Constitution, does not mention his name at all (cf. *Meiji-tennō-ki*, vol. 7: 204-218).

²⁴ Babicz mentions also Kuga Katsunan (陸羯南, 1857-1907), who was already discussed by Kokaze (2011: 138). But Babicz seems to be unaware of Kokaze's publication since it does not appear in his bibliography.

As to the importance of the very date of the ceremony of promulgation Babicz concludes:

February 11, 1889, was not chosen by accident as the day of promulgation of the Constitution. By selecting the 2,549th anniversary of the mythical accession of Jimmu to the throne of Japan, the Japanese leadership was stressing that Japanese modernity was linked to the most remote origins of the imperial dynasty. February 11, 1889, was to mark the official birth of modern Japan. The two decades since the 1868 Meiji Restoration were defined as a mere prologue, a period when modern Japan was erected step by step. The Constitution was crowning that edifice and opening a new and brilliant chapter in Japan's immemorial history. (Babicz 2014: 22)

The promulgation of the constitution, as “a result of the ‘advance of civilization’ [...] was not meant to cut Japan from its origins”, as he points out, on the contrary the day of *kigensetsu*, the day of the founding of the empire by Jinmu-tennō, was chosen “to anchor Japan in its most remote past” (l.c.). “Japan's remote past” refers to the archaic days of the Japanese state which leads to the question how this traditional view of the beginning found its way into the proclamation of Japan's most important basis for its entry into modernity, the constitution. In order to discuss this question, we have to go deeply into history, even archaeology, and have to observe the reception of the relevant archaic elements in modern times. The center of our interest is the figure of Jinmu-tennō and his alleged founding of the Japanese Empire.

3.2 *The historical sources: Kigensetsu and the Jinmu-tennō myth*

Two sources which are considered the oldest Japanese textual traditions have to be mentioned here: the *Kojiki* 古事記 dating from the year 712 CE and the *Nihonshoki* 日本書紀, written only eight years later, in 720 CE. Both works were written down at the imperial court of Heijōkyō (平城京, later Nara), following orders of Emperor Tenmu (天武天皇, 631-686 CE) to preserve the traditions narrating the origin of the world, the Japanese islands, the state and its imperial family. The first chapters of both works report the world's creation and the subsequent “Age of the Gods” (神代, *jindai*). In a modern view, these sections are referred to as the Japanese mythology. In direct connection to the Age of the Gods and without any existential break, the era of humans and human emperor begins, starting with the said Jinmu-tennō. He therefore is, in a certain respect, a literally mythical figure, descended from the Gods of High Heaven. But at the same time he is, although a direct offspring of the heavenly deities, a human being. Being the first – legendary or still mythical – ruler, he is known to the sources by his personal name Iwarebiko, “the man from Iware”. Starting from the southern island of Kyūshū, this Iwarebiko is said to have left for the East, according to the legend, accompanied by an army of warriors until he finally built his palace at the place of Kashihara in Yamato and thus founded the empire. According to the traditional narrative of the old sources, thus, the creation of the world and of the Japanese state is completed by this act and the history of the successive emperors begins with it.

According to the written sources of antiquity (especially the *Nihonshoki*) the imperial Japanese state was therefore mythically founded by Jinmu-tennō. The *Nihonshoki* recorded the founding of Kashihara palace, which marked the beginning of Jinmu's reign:

Year Kanoto Tori, Spring, 1st month 1st day. The Emperor assumed the Imperial Dignity in the Palace of Kashi(ha)-bara. This year is reckoned the first year of his reign. He honored his wife by making her Empress. The children born to him by her were Kami-ya-wi-mimi no Mikoto and Kami-nunagaba mimi-no Mikoto. Therefore there is an ancient saying in praise of this, as follows: "In Kashi(ha)-bara in Unebi, he mightily established his palace-pillars on the foundation of the bottom-rock, and reared aloft the cross roof-timbers to the Plain of High Heaven. The name of the Emperor who thus began to rule the Empire was Kami Yamato Ihare-biko Hohodemi."²⁵

This episode is reported also in the parallel mythological source book *Kojiki*, vol. 2, Jinmu-tennō, but much shorter:

Having thus subdued and pacified the unruly deities and having swept away the defiant people, he dwelt in the palace of KASIPARA (Kashihara) at UNEBĪ (Unebi) and ruled the kingdom.²⁶

Since the days of antiquity until the advent of modern Japan, this creation story was taken as an undoubtable historical fact. Only modern archaeological and historical research proved the absolutely legendary character of the myth of the empire's foundation by virtue of a certain Jinmu-tennō.

3.3. *The archaeological evidence*

Modern archaeological research led to a complete deconstruction of the official view of early history. Since the late nineteenth century it was recognised more and more that the narratives of *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* about the establishment of the Japanese state deserve no historical credibility. Modern historical research, developing at exactly the same time when the modern mytho-historical view was elaborated into the basis of the new, modern state of Japan, proceeded to prove the pure fictionality of this Jinmu-tennō and his foundation of the empire.

As a starting point for an in-depth critical examination an important Shintō shrine, the Kashihara-jingū 橿原神宮, seems suitable. Founded in 1889 – the same year as the promulgation of the constitution! – it is dedicated to the divine souls of the alleged "First Emperor" Jinmu and his wife. It is located within the town of Kashihara in the southern part of Nara Prefecture. In the immediate vicinity of this Shintō shrine is a large burial mound at the foot of nearby Mount Unebi. Since ancient times this place has been regarded as the place of the imperial tomb (陵, *misasagi*) of Jinmu-tennō (Unebi *goryō* 畝傍御陵). Kashihara-jingū and the Unebi-goryō are popular places to visit, and almost everybody going there will be convinced that this is the actual

²⁵ *Nihonshoki* (vol. 3, Jinmu-tennō, 1/1/1 = NKBT 67: 213/2-5 and 214/1-3); Aston (1956, 1: 132).

²⁶ *Kojiki* (NKBT 1: 160/7-8 and 161/7-8); Philipp (1968: 52/62: 177); cf. Antoni (2012: 105).

location of Jinmu's palace and later grave. Neither in the shrine nor at the nearby tomb site is there any information concerning the doubtfulness of this place as a historical site. The mytho-historical view of early Japanese history has obviously constructed a place of real memory at this location until today.²⁷

But the question of the authenticity of "Jinmu's tomb" is an enormously difficult one, as it is pointed out for example by Dennis Kawaharada. According to him it is more than doubtful whether a real tomb or coffin exist at the present site of the Unebi *goryō* at all since this place was established as Jinmu-tennō's grave site for political reasons only:

After defeating those who opposed him [Jinmu], he became the first emperor of Japan and built a palace in Kashihara, south of Nara. He was buried in a mausoleum "on the top of the Kashi Spur on the northern side of Mount Unebi" (*Kojiki* 185) or "in the Misasagi ["tomb," traditionally a mound of earth] northeast of Mount Unebi" (*Nihon shoki* 135).

In 1863, during the reign of Meiji, the one hundred twenty-second head of the imperial family, a site in a grove of trees just north of Mt. Unebi and Kashihara shrine was designated as Jimmu's tomb. (The actual burial site is unknown.) In 1877, Meiji made a visit to pay homage to his ancestor. (Kawaharada *online*)

Newest research supports this critical view. As Brigitte Pickl-Kolaczia (2015) points out, the decision for the actual site of "Jinmu's tomb" was personally made by Emperor Kōmei (孝明天皇, 1831-1867), the father of Meiji-tennō (cf. Pickl-Kolaczia 2015: 65). In a decree (御沙汰, *gosata*) dating from April 4th 1863, he himself decided to choose the site of the so called Jibu-den (神武田, "field of emperor Jinmu['s grave]"), which had since medieval times been repeatedly associated with the correct place of Jinmu's grave (cf. Pickl-Kolaczia 2015: 62). But obviously no verification had ever taken place, no attempt at proving whether there had ever even existed a grave or coffin at the site has been undertaken. The imperial decision was based on traditional speculation, not on archaeological or scientific verification. Pickl-Kolaczia (2015: 66) calls the newly created site of "Jinmu's tomb" "a complete new creation of a place of worship".

From the standpoint of critical research this does not seem surprising since a historical person "Jinmu-tennō" has never existed in reality. And for a purely mythical figure there could hardly be a real tomb! As the Jibu-den shows, the people of medieval times already started to search for the place of the grave they knew from

²⁷ As it is stated in a recent scholarly work on the topic (Michael Wachutka 2013: 38): "As mentioned above, on 5 December 1862, already in the final days of the Tokugawa shogunate, Emperor Kōmei expressed his desire that the dilapidated imperial tombs of Jinmu and others be repaired and restored. At that time, Toda Tadayuki was appointed by the shogunate as the magistrate to oversee these repairs of the imperial tombs (MTK 1: 310). As part of the Jinmu-tennō revival movement, many adherents of an imperial restoration based on ancient times considered the matter of the Unebi 畝傍 tomb – the tomb of Jinmu – and, by extension, of the various imperial mausolea, to be an urgent question that was as important as the reinstating of the Jingikan. Hence, including the various imperial tombs in the Jingikan's administrative duties was again most likely based on the influence of contemporary *kokugaku* scholars."

the sources. But as it seems there is no “tomb” at all in the Unebi *goryō* and certainly no corpse of “Jinmu-tennō”!²⁸

But it is a matter of fact that such scientific research and scepticism could not succeed on the long run against the constructions of political mythology in Meiji Japan. Outside the realm of scientific historiography the illusion of an imperial foundation by a certain Jinmu-tennō prevailed and this idea became a mighty weapon in the ideological struggle of modern Japan.

3.4 *On the kigen calendar*

The scientific understanding of early history had from the late Meiji days onward been competing with a completely different chronological system, which eventually became compulsory during World War II. And even after the war, in present day Japan, it retains some importance, albeit in more symbolic terms. This alternative conception of prehistory was based not on Western approaches to archaeological research or historical analysis, but on the written records from antiquity – *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* – mentioned above. It is a most fascinating fact that the archaeological research on the one hand and the creation of a mytho-historical construct of prehistory on the other occurred simultaneously during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The traditionalistic²⁹ conception of history remained of fundamental importance among the Japanese public from the Meiji period until the end of World War II since it served as a legitimising tool for the historical foundations of the new imperial Japan. In this mythical account the historical starting point was given a specific date which in the Western calendar corresponds to the year 660 BCE. This was defined as the year of the founding of the Japanese Empire by Jinmu-tennō. Even a specific Japanese calendarian system, called *kigen* (紀元, “the beginning of the dynasty”) or *kōki* (皇紀, “imperial era”), was introduced as early as 1872 when the Gregorian calendar was adopted.³⁰ This calendarian system used the year 660 BCE as the point zero for a linear Japanese historical chronology.

Thus, we are confronted with the construct of a national, particularly Japanese calendar, which is no longer in official use today, but was standard until the end of the Pacific War. In this calendar, the year of Jinmu’s accession to the throne³¹ and founding of the empire corresponds to 660 BCE. Especially the *Nihonshoki* adopted the chronological speculations of the Chinese 60-years cycle. As John Brownlee (1991: 31) points out, the year 601 CE, which was the ninth year of the reign of

²⁸ For further archaeological research on the problem of Unebi *goryō* cf. the scientific articles by Harunari (1975) and Takagi (2000).

²⁹ On the concept of “traditionalism” cf. Antoni (2016: 243-244).

³⁰ “The method of counting years from the legendary founding of Japan (in 660 B.C.) was begun in the early Meiji period (1868–1912) and commonly used until the end of World War II, when it was abandoned. To find the Western equivalent for a year, simply add 660 to the number. The word *kigen* (the beginning of the dynasty) or *kōki* (imperial era) is sometimes prefixed to such dates to differentiate them from years of the Christian era.” Webb (1983)

³¹ *Jimmu-tennō-sokubi-bi*, cf. Lokowandt (2012: 38).

Empress Suiko (推古天皇, reigned 592-628), “provided a basis from which to calculate backwards”. Using a combined system of cycles with a year called *ippō* – “a year in the cycle which is 21 times 60 [...] and is a time of great change” –, the compilers of the *Nihonshoki* calculated back for a period of 1,260 years, “and arrived at 660 BCE for the *ippō*, which had to be the year of accession of Emperor Jinmu” (Brownlee 1991: 31).³² The first translator of the *Nihonshoki*, W. G. Aston (1975: 132, n. 2) already emphasised in his commentary, first published in 1896, that the date was of no historical validity, comparable to the legendary founding of Rome in 753 BCE.

In the Meiji period, this date was decreed to be the sacrosanct founding date for the Japanese Empire,³³ and it was not historically questioned until the end of World War II.

The historian Takeda Hideaki comments in this context:

In 1873, the Meiji government, which was hurrying to found a modern nation built on the ideal of Emperor Jinmu as the first emperor, “identified” the date of his ascension (*sokui*) as the eleventh day of the second lunar month and created a new calendar that counted that year [ca. 585 BCE]³⁴ as year zero of a new “common era”. Thus, February 11 became the day for *Kigensetsu sai* at the palace as well as a national holiday. (Takeda *online*)

But this process had already started in late Tokugawa times as Michael Wachutka (2013: 15) points out in his study of the subject:

Along the same line of thought, several nativists throughout the *bakumatsu* and even the early Meiji period proposed that counting the years according to era names (*nengō* 年号) should be abolished and instead Emperor Jinmu’s accession be used as calendrical starting point. As early as 1840, Fujita Tōko 藤田東湖 (1806 – 1855) celebrated the 2500th anniversary since Emperor Jinmu’s accession to the throne.

[...] But even proponents of Western enlightenment such as Tsuda Mamichi 津田真道 (1823 – 1903) in May 1869 made similar claims. [...] By proposing the abolishment of era counting, he very likely therefore wanted to emulate the convenience of the Western *anno Domini*.

³² On the following cf. Antoni (2012: 376, note 118). Matsumura Kazuo (*online*) states in this context: “The ascension of Jinmu was placed in a Shinyū year (660 BCE), which in China was designated as a year of great revolution. The *Nihon shoki* compilers set the present as their starting point, and projected a chronological lineage into the past, even as they left the future chronology open. At the same time that they modeled the record after Chinese annals, they spliced in mythology, and were able to emphasize the peculiar trait that the imperial lineage was of divine blood.” This is explicitly also called the „Kanototori-Revolution”. Naberfeld (1965: 15) states: “Der Jahreszahl 660 v. Chr. liegt der Zyklus Kanoto-tori (Metall-jüngerer Bruder-Vogel) zu Grunde. Da die 21. Wiederkehr dieses Zyklus, die Zahl 1260, als besonders glückverheißend galt, hat man diese vom 9. Regierungsjahr der Kaiserin Suiko (601) zurückgerechnet. So ergab sich das Antrittsjahr des ersten japanischen Herrschers.”

³³ “The chronology which fixes the date of the accession of Jimmu Tennō at 660 B.C. is officialized in modern Japanese law and in imperial edict alike” (Holtom 1922: 189).

³⁴ It is not clear why Takeda uses the date 585 BCE in this context since the only correct symbolical date is 660 BCE.

As Brownlee (1991: 32) states, “the accession of Jinmu in 660 BC became an established truth, which no historian in traditional Japan would ever have thought of questioning.” It was foreign scholars in Japan doing research on Japan’s prehistory, who first expressed their doubts concerning this mytho-historical view. The eminent scholar Basil Hall Chamberlain, the first translator of the *Kojiki* into a Western language, already mentioned in his still highly valuable (Naumann 1996: 19) “Introduction” to the translation and in presentations before the *Asiatic Society of Japan* on April 12th and June 21st 1882 (Chamberlain 1982 [¹1883]: i-ci) that the real history of the Japanese state must be regarded as “more than a thousand years later than the date usually accepted” (ibid: lxx). “400 AD,” he continued, “is approximately the highest limit of reliable Japanese history” (ibid: lxxxvii). Chamberlain reached a highly modern conclusion by theoretically opposing the idea of Japanese cultural homogeneity and exclusivity and stating “in almost all known cases culture has been introduced from abroad, and has not been spontaneously developed” (ibid: xciii). This is a remarkable standpoint for the 1880s, one that seems to anticipate modern comparative cultural studies.

Historical and archaeological research since Chamberlain’s time has proven his results to be correct. But for official Japan, the illusion of a monogenetic foundation through Jinmu-tennō never became obsolete, at least until the end of World War II.

3.5 Further ideological developments

It was in the era of early Shōwa State Shintō and official *kokutai*-nationalism, that the idea of the foundation of the Japanese Empire on February 11th 660 BCE eventually became a central topic and event in Japan. The affirmative reception of the alleged Jinmu-tennō served as a basic pillar for the 1930s and early 1940s’ war propaganda, especially at the festivities for the 2,600th anniversary in the year 1940 (which were held in Berlin, too). Official propaganda scriptures, as *Kokutai no hongī* (國體の本義, 1937) or *Shinmin no michi* (臣民の道, 1941/1943),³⁵ emphasised the importance of Jinmu-tennō for the present Japanese Empire.

The *Kokutai no hongī* declared for example:

The Emperor Jimmu ascended the Throne with such a deep august mind as this, and with a great spirit [which had in mind] the uniting of the whole realm and the mantling of the whole world.³⁶

And in the *Shinmin no michi* we read about the war time slogan of *hakkō ichiu* (八紘一宇, “the whole world under one roof”), which referred to a saying by Jinmu-tennō in the *Nihonshoki*:

[...] The eastward expedition of Emperor Jimmu was carried out, and this resulted in the pacification of the great eight provinces and the consequent selection of his capital at Kashihara in Yamato Province. [...]

³⁵ Cf. *Shinmin no michi* 1943 (2003) and Tolischus (1943).

³⁶ *Kokutai no hongī*, part II, cf. *Kokutai no hongī* (1937: 68); Gauntlett, Hall (1949: 108).

The Imperial spirit of expanding the Imperial tasks is mainly based on this spirit and policy [of the Emperor Jimmu] at the time of the Empire-founding. The succeeding Emperors have been ruling over the Empire in observance of these precepts. The Imperial Rescript granted by His Majesty the Emperor at the time of the conclusion of the Japan-German-Italian Tripartite Alliance mentioned the following: “It has been the great instructions bequeathed by Our Imperial Foundress and other Imperial Ancestors that our grand moral obligation should be extended to all directions, and the world be unified under one roof. This is the point We are trying to obey day in and day out.”³⁷

After World War II the national holiday for the commemoration of Jimmu’s accession to the throne on February 11th, *kigensetsu* 紀元節,³⁸ was abolished in 1948. But in the year 1966 this festival date was revived as national holiday in the new form of a “National Foundation Day”, *kenkoku kinen no hi* 建国記念の日.³⁹ Thus, although without the pre-1945 nationalistic agenda, February 11th still serves to commemorate the mythical foundation of the empire in 660 BCE in present day Japan.

And even in very recent political debates the topic arises frequently. Quite recently, for instance, in March 2015, the following incident was reported in the press:

During her question in the Diet last week, Junko Mihara, a member of the Upper House who belongs to the Liberal Democratic Party, employed a phrase closely associated with Japan’s militarism and nationalism in the 1930s and ’40s — “Hakko Ichiu,” which literally means putting all the eight corners of the world under one roof [...]

The phrase was coined by Chigaku Tanaka, an activist of the Nichiren school of Buddhism, in 1913 by taking a cue from a remark attributed to Japan’s legendary first Emperor Jimmu. *Nihon Shoki* (*The Chronicles of Japan*), an official history book completed in 720, quotes him as saying just prior to his enthronement in the legendary palace of Kashihara in what is now Nara Prefecture: “I will cover the eight corners of the world and make them my abode”.⁴⁰

Far from denying the fundamental political, social and ideological changes Japan underwent after the war, it seems obvious that the topic of the mythical figure of Jimmu-tennō and his alleged foundation of the empire on February 11th 660 BCE, played and still plays an important role in the political mythology of modern Japan.

The historian Chiara Bottici defines the term “political myth” as:

³⁷ *Shinmin no Michi*, part III/1, cf. *Shinmin no Michi* (1943 (2003): 32-33); Tolischus (1943: 423).

³⁸ Cf. Hardacre (1989: 101) who explains *kigensetsu* as “[c]ommemorating the founding of the Yamato dynasty by Emperor Jimmu”; cf. the *Kigensetsu*-controversy on the re-establishment of this holiday after the war.

³⁹ Thus, although the fictional nature of the event and especially the date have long been known in historical science, this holiday, which was of great ideological importance in pre-war and war-time Japan, was reinstated after the war. A discussion of the field can be found in Lokowandt (1981: 15, 17 and 153-172; collected materials on the topic of the National Founding Day).

⁴⁰ *Japan Times*, “Wartime slogan should stay buried”, March 24, 2015

[...] the work on a common narrative, which provides significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group. Therefore, what makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is not its content or its claim to truth, but (1) the fact that it coagulates and reproduces significance; (2) that it is shared by a given group; and (3) that it can address the specifically political conditions in which a given group lives. (Bottici 2006: 320)

And Christopher Flood writes in his book on a theoretical introduction to the topic of political myth:

[...] political myths do not have sacred status in secular societies, but they need to be accepted as fundamentally true by an identifiable group, whatever its size or constituency. (Flood 1996: 41)

[...] an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account of a set of past, present, and predicted political events and which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group. (ibid: 44)

In this sense modern Japan is a key example in world history for the productiveness of political mythology within the concept of the modern state. This world of ideas is deeply interwoven with the concept of tradition and, of course, the matter of “invented traditions” within the field of ritual and ceremony. We will thus finally turn to the role of Jinmu-tennō’s political myth for modern Japan.

4. Traditionalism and invented traditions in Meiji Japan⁴¹

The famous study by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) on invented traditions provides an excellent methodological basis for analysing this issue. The term “invention” is crucial in this context. Thus, one speaks of intentionally “invented” or manipulated traditions whose traditional nature is merely assumed. Hobsbawm focuses primarily on the areas of ritual and symbolism:

Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. The actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied by historians. (Hobsbawm/Ranger 1983: 4)

In a study on this topic, the author covers the genesis and function of such rituals and symbols in several countries, including Italy, France, Germany and the United States. This is clearly also the pattern for developments in Japan during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴²

Hobsbawm and Ranger do not mention the case of Japan in this context. But especially remarkable examples of this phenomenon can be found in the areas of ceremony and rituals of Meiji Japan. Already in 1986 a dissertation by the historian Fujitani Takashi was published at the University of California entitled *Japan’s Modern*

⁴¹ On this topic cf. Antoni (2016: 239-247).

⁴² Invented traditions can be also found in earlier periods of Japanese religious and intellectual history (cf. Antoni 1997).

National Ceremonies: A Historical Ethnography, 1868-1912. It covers some of the great national ceremonies that were introduced during the Meiji period. The formation of a canon of state ceremonies was necessary for the process of Japanese nation building, particularly during the second half of the Meiji period. According to Fujitani, the new empire was confronted with two challenges: the need to establish national unity – that is, a common Japanese national consciousness – and the need to demonstrate the power of the new nation state of Japan to the rest of the world. These domestic and foreign-policy necessities resulted in the creation of a comprehensive national apparatus of symbols as the visible expression of the legitimacy to rule. This included the creation of a capital, Tōkyō, with all the attributes not only of a centre of political power, but also as the spiritual centre of the nation. Fujitani cites the work of Hobsbawm directly and concludes with unmistakable clarity:

During the period from the second half of the nineteenth century through the early-twentieth century, Japan's governing elites also invented, revived, manipulated and encouraged national rituals with unprecedented vigor. Through rituals the rulers helped to bring a country divided horizontally into regions and vertically into estates under one ruler and one legitimating sacred order. (1986: 18)

Two basic conclusions can be drawn here. Firstly, cultural elements in Japan during the Meiji period that appear to be traditional and even ancient cannot be taken *a priori* as remnants of earlier cultural strata, and must not be left unchecked as arguments for traditional authenticity. Rather, in each individual case it must be evaluated whether these cultural elements are not actually creations, or at least modifications and manipulations, that belong to the modern age – more specifically, to the development towards the Japanese nation state at the end of the nineteenth century. An observer who is too easily blinded by the supposedly authentic traditional nature of such elements risks overlooking the ideological function of the Meiji era manipulation of such cultural elements. The unquestioning reception of national symbolism results in a kind of exoticism that ultimately threatens to lead to the cultural (self-)isolation of Japan.

Secondly, this process of manipulating tradition was not by any means limited to Japan. The situation in Meiji-period Japan is not the only case of a country in which tradition and modernity entered into a unique relationship. On the contrary, the case of Japan is an especially instructive example of a process that was underway throughout the world at this point in history and which can be understood within the context of the formation of nation states at the end of the nineteenth century. The manipulation and even creation of traditions was an essential factor in this development. In this context, Japan does not appear to be a “late” nation as is often supposed in the discourse of modernity. On the contrary, the formation of the Japanese nation state, which could be said to be an example of what is called a “nativist regression” in cultural anthropology, occurred simultaneously to similar developments in Europe and reached its first peak, as was also the case in Europe, at the end of the nineteenth century. This shows that Japan cannot be said to be unusual in its development in comparison with other countries, but rather that it provides a nearly

inexhaustible reservoir of world-historical material relevant to the study of nation-building beginning at the end of the nineteenth century.

One could even say that the introduction of the National Foundation Day (February 11th) in the Japan of the Meiji period was not a case of specifically Japanese historical continuity, but rather the Japanese manifestation of a global phenomenon (nation-building) characteristic of the time during which Japan sought to demonstrate its regional authenticity by using the religious inventory of its indigenous culture (Jinmu-tennō). As outlined in the previous discussion, visible national symbols – monuments, ceremonies etc. – played a crucial role in this context, as mostly invented traditions. Kokaze points to the socio-political role of ceremonial in the Japanese case, stating “[...] that 1889 was the year in which the post Restoration political conflicts dissolved in a cycle of political ceremonial, the pivot of which was the Constitutional promulgation itself” (Kokaze 2011: 131). In his final conclusion Kokaze suggests to regard the modernisation process of this epoch as part of a global phenomenon, that is:

The process whereby “native” turns “national” was a “relativisation” of the universal values of the nineteenth century West [...]. It was a restoration of the ethnic and the romantic; an attempt in brief to establish a Japanese nationalism. (Kokaze 2011: 139)

5. Conclusion

Unfortunately, it is not possible to go deeper into the discussion of problems of theory and the position of Japanese political mythology in this context. But it may be concluded that the modern empire of Japan was established after the Meiji Restoration by taking recourse to the historical construct of a mythical-legendary empire allegedly founded by a certain “Jinmu-tennō” in prehistoric times. An event, as cannot be stated often enough, with no historical or archaeological evidence whatsoever. The real emergence of the Japanese state in prehistory was an evolutionary one, occurring about 1,000 years later than the mythical date of 660 BCE. The mythical story of this foundation is told in the oldest Japanese source books, dating from the early 8th century CE. After the decline of the early imperial state during the medieval ages, this myth was actively revived by the authorities of the new empire in the course of the Meiji Restoration. Since Japan can be regarded as an outstanding example for such a functionalisation of myths in the past as well as in the present, we came to focus on the question of political mythology. One of the basic functions of myths and mythologies is to provide the political sphere with structures of (sacred) legitimacy. Of utmost interest in this respect is the blending of traditions, deriving from the Japanese history as well as from European, or more generally western, sources.

In the case of Ottmar von Mohl, we witnessed the concrete process of a creation, or blending, of heterogeneous traditions and thus the dual aspects of modernity in Japan. In collaboration with his Japanese colleagues he transformed the European – in most parts Prussian – models of state ceremony and court ritual to fit the new Japanese empire’s needs, interestingly in conflict with Itō Hirobumi on the question of

including also some Japanese traditional elements into these new ceremonial structures, especially regarding the official costumes. Although von Mohl may have been guided by exoticism and romanticism to some extent, his interest in and respect for what he thought to be old Japanese culture and traditions seem genuine. Itō Hirobumi, on the other hand, rejected any aspect of traditional models for the state ceremony, arguing that Japan would be internationally accepted on equal footing only when behaving like a “modern” state. But reading his official commentaries on the constitution, a different side of Itō becomes visible. Here he states, for example on the first article:

Since the time when the first Imperial Ancestor opened it, the country has not been free from occasional checks in its prosperity nor from frequent disturbances of its tranquility; but the splendor of the Sacred Throne transmitted through an unbroken line of one and the same dynasty has always remained as immutable as that of the heavens and of the earth. [...] (Itō 1906: 2)

And on the third article Itō writes:

“The Sacred Throne was established at the time when the heavens and the earth became separated” (Kojiki). The Emperor is Heaven-descended, divine and sacred. [...] (ibid: 7)

Itō here leaves no room for doubts that the basis of the new empire – he even mentions the *Kojiki* first in this context – rests on the foundation by the “Imperial Ancestor”, who is nobody but Jinmu-tennō. In Itō’s implicit interpretation of this ancestral figure and his alleged foundation of the archaic state in 660 BCE, both branches of tradition meet in 1889: the “modern” branch, represented by Ottmar von Mohl and his introduction of European court ceremonial, and the seemingly “archaic” one, personified by Jinmu-tennō.

Such an antagonistic view of “tradition” versus “modernity” has been used in modern Japan since the Meiji Restoration as a standard of self-interpretation, as is evident in the slogans *wakon-yōsai* and *tōyō no dōtoku seiyō no gakugei* (Antoni 2016: 240). The expression *wakon-yōsai* (和魂洋才, “Japanese spirit, Western skill (technology)”) was increasingly used in Japan during the Meiji period to indicate a constructive antagonism between (Japanese) tradition and (Western) technological and civilisational modernity. The similar expression *tōyō no dōtoku seiyō no gakugei* (東洋道德西洋学芸, “Eastern ethics, Western science”) was originally coined by the Confucian scholar Sakuma Shōzan (佐久間象山, 1811-1864), and Tsunoda et al. remark:

The formula proved workable enough to serve a whole generation of leaders during the Meiji Restoration, and to provide the basis for a modernization program of unparalleled magnitude in the late nineteenth century. (Tsunoda et al. 1964, II: 100)

Modernity as something (usefully) foreign stands in contrast to indigenously defined tradition; a country such as Japan that is envied for its outstanding success especially in the area of “modernity” thus excels as a model of allegedly authentic culture that can ultimately be seen as an example of a new “ancient” modernity. In Itō Hirobumi we find combined the dual aspects of Meiji modernity. As the direct supervisor

of Ottmar von Mohl he provided his foreign advisor – or rather his assistant? – with clear instructions with regard to “modern” court ceremony and ritual on the one hand, while as the main author and commentator of the constitution on the other hand, he drew directly on the *Kojiki*'s archaic mythology (cf. Antoni 2012) as the basis of the new state. All this symbolically culminates in one date: February 11th 1889. A closer look at this date, however, reveals the historical complexity of the entire ideological set: Since the day of the foundation in 660 BCE was an illusion, a mythical fake, as modern historiography already knew when the constitution was ceremonially promulgated in commemoration of this day in 1889, the *wakon*-basis of modern Japan stands on very loose ground. As all the simple explanations become open to doubt, Ottmar von Mohl, the European moderniser, argues with Itō about including at least some of the real traditions of old Japan into the modern ritual, while Itō, his Japanese supervisor, who fanatically tries to modernise court and empire, constructed a constitution which in fact rested on the basis of political mythology.

The ceremonial events at the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution do not just signify “a restoration of the ethnic and the romantic”, as Kokaze pointed out (see above), but a merger and invention of traditions as the basis for modern Japan.

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