A Sense of Place: The Political Landscape in Late Medieval Japan

by David Spafford
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One place all of us who study Japan think we know is the city of Tokyo and the Kantō plain. Do we not see it from the air when we land at Narita? Have we not crisscrossed it east-west, north-south as we go about our business visiting the libraries, archives, and research institutes of the area's universities? We are experts on taking trains and subways, busses, and taxis around town. Some of us even know how to drive cars through that concrete madness, that ocean of human settlement, where people calculate ground prices per square foot. It is hard to imagine that this city is barely four centuries old, mind boggling to think that most of the crowding dates only from the last one hundred and fifty years.

The book under review is about this area *before* it became Japan's largest population center. It describes a place we do not recognize, except perhaps on its very edges, the outskirts of today's megalopolis in Kamakura in the west, Chichibu in the north, and Utsunomiya in the east. Everything in between has been irrevocably altered. Landmarks have disappeared, rivers have been rerouted, and the rest has been covered in cement, asphalt, and the steel of train rails. On page 50 of *A Sense of Place: The Political Landscape in Late Medieval Japan*, there is a

somewhat nostalgically tinted photograph of a grassy area in Musashino Park, taken by the author, who comments that it was all he was able to find of the one distinguishing feature the plain was known for during most of its history. The grasses of Musashino have gone the way of the Neanderthal man and the Dodo.

In his choice of place and period, David Spafford has not made things easy for himself. The Kantō plain between 1450 and 1550 was an area that had lost most of its defining framework of the past. With the imperial state long gone and the Muromachi polity only weakly represented, the plain was left without a social center. And, as Hayden White has argued in his essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," where there is no social center there can be no coherent historical narrative.[1] It is not surprising, therefore, that Spafford has opted to present his history of the Kantō as an anti-narrative account, in which each chapter highlights certain aspects of the area he has distilled from the sources.

The first chapter, "The Grasses of Musashino," deals with how the Kantō was perceived by its contemporaries, the title of the chapter pointedly echoing a literary tradition that dates back to the Nara period. In the second chapter, "Disputes over Land," the author treats the primary concern over the documents of this period remaining today. The third chapter, "Two Was Better than Eighteen?," tracks an example of the process by which successful local warriors were forced to abandon much of their ancestral land rights in order to consolidate their holdings into defensible units. His fourth chapter, "No Longer the Age for Camping," is about the paradox that with a castellan revolution bringing fortresses to the Kantō plain, many warriors simultaneously remained tied to the temporary encampments of their overlords. In his fifth and last chapter,

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[1] See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1-25.

"The Pointillist Plain," Spafford analyzes the language of borders, boundaries, and military frontiers and is surprised to find so little of it in the corpus of contemporary writings.

The political fragmentation of the plain, he concludes, made clear delineation of authority itself impossible, and so all borders, boundaries, or frontiers had become fuzzy and hard to make out. Instead of mentioning borders, medieval Japanese used rather the verb *kosu* (to cross over) when they traveled from one point to another on the plain. To a speaker of a European language, one wonders whether the unfamiliar use of the verbs *iku* or *yuku* (go to your territory) and *kuru* (come into my territory) in modern Japanese also derives from this same historical situation of endlessly divided authority during the medieval period.

The importance of this book is that it is the first book-length treatment of the Kantō (in a language other than Japanese) *before* the establishment of the Tokugawa polity. Inevitably, perhaps, it contains traces of its pioneering use of Japanese scholarship, with which the author shows great familiarity. His readers, however, are not likely to be as well versed in the scholarly literature and as familiar with the sources, events, and people that make up the medieval history of the Kantō. This makes *A Sense of Place*, at least for this reader, extremely slow going. Obviously, Appendix A "Springs and Autumns in the Kantō" is meant to help in this respect, but, without this being explicitly stated somewhere in the beginning of the book, that function remains hidden behind its literary allusion to a Chinese classic of annalistic history. One may wonder whether most of the information contained in it could not have been woven into the fabric of the text itself.

This takes us to our last consideration of this wonderfully learned book. Where do we go from here? Who is the next historian to come along and engage with Spafford's work? The sad fact is that this monument of scholarship, unless translated into Japanese, is doomed to remain unread by the vast majority of those it is in dialogue with, i.e. the medievalists of Japan, except the four or five of them who can read

English. This is, of course, true for most scholarship on Japan produced overseas, but particularly so for that on Japanese history. Such work is impossible without the research, publications, and direct help of Japanese scholars. Yet, these same scholars remain in dialogue only with each other and routinely ignore everything that is published in languages other than Japanese. In that respect, Japanese history remains one of the most myopically insular fields of scholarship in the world.