

The Oldest Extant Literary Work in Japan as a Sourcebook of Japanese Mythology

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ABSTRACT

The Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters, AD 712, three volumes) is the oldest preserved work of Japanese literature. It was compiled by Oo no Yasumaro at the Emperor's bequest, with an aim to point out the legitimacy of the imperial family and to prove the emperor's divine origin. It is based on the imperial genealogies, as well as on the ancient myths, tales, legends and poems, transmitted orally throughout the provinces of the then Japan. The Kojiki is closely related to the ancient Japanese polytheistic religion – Shinto. It is on Shintoist thought that the work gives a complex image of the Japanese pantheon, assembled of innumerable deities, the kami. Apart from treating the original cultural heritage of the Japanese people, what also provokes special interest of this valuable work is an abundance of similarities to the familiar myths of the neighboring cultures, but also to the traditions of the peoples living in distant regions, without any contact with ancient Japan. Among many others, there are motifs related to the Land of the Dead, as the third part of the trichotomic cosmic structure: the motif of tasting food in the other world which causes the return to be impossible – widely known as the motif of Persephone, the Orphic motif of violating the forbiddance of looking which leads to permanent separation from the beloved person, or the magic escape motif with characteristic metamorphoses. In other words, the Kojiki contains the large number of universal international themes and motifs, which can be found in the cultures of the peoples worldwide. It is possible to reach them by means of comparative analysis. This kind of research provides a new perspective on the study of literature, mythology, and tradition.