

Keynote lecture 2

CENTRAL ASIAN AND JAPANESE MYTHOLOGY

Michael Witzel (USA)

This presentation takes a look at early Japanese myths from the outside – from across the vast reaches of Inner Asia. A comparison will be made relying on the oldest Indian texts, the Vedas, and the closely related Old Iranian text, the Avesta, as well as their ancestral Indo-Iranian mythology.

Comparisons between the Kojiki/Nihon Shoki and Northern Iranian (Scythian) as well as Greek and other western Indo-European myths have successfully been made, for decades, by Yoshida Atsuhiko. However, a connection between India and Japan seems unlikely for the pre-state period.

Yet, the Indo-Iranians (c. 2000 BCE) of the Central Asian steppe belt were in (in) direct contact with their eastern neighbors. That includes the close relatives of the early Japanese, the Kōkuri people of Manchuria, and thus, with early Yayoi culture that is now dated as far back as 1000 BCE. Both Vedic India and Old Japan function as ‘refuge’ areas, according to the principle of retention of archaisms in outlying regions. Many of their mythological similarities therefore find a ready explanation.

In this presentation, a few of the most obviously related Vedic and Japanese myths will be compared; occasionally, Iranian and other Indo-European materials will be included; however further, world-wide comparisons of individual myths cannot be included here.