“What makes the Mido kanpakuki so special”

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(tr. by Charlotte Schäfer, ed. by Anna Andreeva)

At the end of each year the bookstores fill with various types of nikki (diaries). Having never kept a diary but picture diaries in primary school myself, I have always been amazed by how many people find determination to keep such records. During my college days I found keeping a notebook difficult, but since I have started my professional work I have begun using a day planner for appointments like seminars, meetings, business trips, workshops, research group meetings, or social gatherings. I use blank pages to make notes of the material which I would need to talk about in my next seminar, or points I want to address at a meeting, or shops I want to visit during my next business trip.

With the arrival of mobile electronic devices, I have been using an organizer program instead of a paper notebook. This organizer does not only have a calendar which lets me make appointments at fifteen-minute intervals but also a "to do" feature for every day, a year-round schedule and a notebook feature, all of which I am perusing frequently. As long as I carry a device with me that uses such software, I can look up what I did at a certain event last year, who remarked on what and at which meeting, or what I ate where last time I was in a certain town at any given time. Since "Outlook" by Microsoft and the "Calendar", "Notebook" and "Address book" in iPhone/iPad are all able to synchronize, it is sufficient to carry only one of these with me.

Now, nikki are a form of diary that most of aristocratic figures, and moreover, the emperor (tennō), kept during the Heian period (794-1185). However, these nikki have very different features from the private diaries written by people today. Their purpose was to record in a detailed manner the official events such as the affairs of State and to document whether such ceremonies had been executed in the appropriate order stipulated by law and historical precedents. If there had been any anomalies, the political figures at court noted those in order to preserve such vital information for their offspring, the aristocratic society to come, and sometimes for the ministers of the emperor's court (kugyô) of the same period. That is why they are often called kokiroku (records of old times) instead of nikki.

Seen from a global perspective, this phenomenon seems to have taken a distinct shape and bore a special meaning for the history of Japan, touching the very root of [its political and social] culture [Editor’s note: and affecting the ways of how Japan’s own historiography was constructed]. Especially vital here is the fact that Japan’s pre-modern sovereigns kept their own nikki, a feature [that I consider] characteristic of the historic Japanese royal house [Editor’s note: Although there may be surviving records penned personally by the monarchs, royal and aristocratic figures across different societies and time periods, the examples of aristocratic and royal nikki in Heian and Kamakura Japan are certainly some of the earliest].

At my university, I had a collaborative research project on "General Research on nikki". Collaborative research is supposed to be international, interdisciplinary and comprehensive, but even after thorough investigation we could find almost no diaries from pre-modern times, not only in Europe but also in China and the Korean Peninsula. In China, such absence may in part be explained because the official history writing was always continued in an unbroken line. Contrary to China, the compilation of official histories (called rikkokushi) had been abolished in early Japan, which is why from the Heian period on, there were so many nikki produced by the court nobility. The aristocrats relied on a large accumulation of nikki as a kind of basic instructions detailing the execution of important rites and ceremonies that presented the core essence for the affairs of state. The Heian-period nikki were therefore not simply the records written privately by a single person or family, but a
political and cultural phenomenon that was produced by and shared within the aristocratic society of the time, preserving their practices [and notions of legitimacy] for the use by future generations.

Fujiwara no Michinaga's *Midô kanpaku ki* has been preserved in its original handwritten version until today. In this autobiographical record, the author has written down the daily matters directly into a *guchûreki* (a personal annotated calendar). The *Midô kanpaku ki* is thus an invaluable historical source among the Heian-period *nikki*. Furthermore, it is not the record by a nameless courtier but by the person who was in a position of highest power [during the Heian period] and who strongly influenced the shape of Japanese politics and culture during that time. The *Midô kanpaku ki* has been recommended by the Japanese government to the Memory of the World programme, which is the documentary heritage project and one of three such major programmes run by the UNESCO. It has recently been officially included in the UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” Register.

I think this shows why the *Midô kanpaku ki* has just as much value as a historical source as the Magna Carta of the United Kingdom, Beethoven's ninth Symphony of Germany or the Declaration of Human Rights of France. Since I myself have been engaged in recommending this historical document for the UNESCO project, there is no greater joy for me than the fact of such official recognition. But even though the historical value of the *Midô kanpaku ki* is obvious to a person well-versed in Japanese history and culture, it has been very challenging to convince the Eurocentric members of the UNESCO committee. They were unable to grasp the value of a diary kept by the minister of such a remote country in the tenth and early eleventh century, despite the fact that the diary as a type of historical document in the comparable time period did not exist elsewhere. Our strategy was to bring forward the arguments that this was the *nikki* of the patron of the *Genji monogatari*, that it was a detailed calendar of the time one thousand years ago, that it contained a very detailed information about the weather and natural catastrophes of the time, and that it had a universal value within the cultural sphere shared by countries and regions with historical use of Sinitic characters (*kanji*) [Editor’s note: within East and parts of South-East Asia].

To return to my original topic, the *nikki* of the Heian nobility show the characteristics very similar to the day planner or organizer software that I am using today. There is one huge difference, though. All those *nikki* were paper scrolls. While I can simply search through my software or turn the pages of my day planner, the Heian-period writers and readers of *nikki* had to carefully scroll down those fragile paper rolls by hand, repeatedly unrolling them and rolling them up again until they found the entry they were looking for. This makes me rather glad that I was born today.