

CHAPTER ONE

Japanese History: Origins to the Twelfth Century



A twelfth century Japanese fan. Superimposed on a painting of a gorgeously clad nobleman and his lady in a palace setting are verses in Chinese from a Buddhist sutra. The aesthetic pairing of sacred and secular was a feature of life at the Heian court. The fan could well have been used by a figure in Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*. [Tokyo National Museum]

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Beginnings

Nara and Heian Japan

Aristocratic Culture and Buddhism

Early Japan in Historical Perspective

BEGINNINGS

The earth is 4.5 billion years old, and Asia, 1 billion. Over eons, limestone, sand, and salt were deposited on the Asian continental shelf. About 200 million years ago, the crest of islands now known as Japan rose from the sea as the North Pacific and Philippine plates descended under the continental shelf. As the mountainous islands weathered, areas of the sedimentary layer wore off, leaving the Japanese Alps, extrusions of granite. Friction between the plates descending under the shelf produced volcanoes that added a surface layer of volcanic ash.

The island arc of Japan has the same range of climates as the United States. On the northern island of Hokkaido, which became a part of Japan only in recent centuries, ice and snow may last into spring. On the southern island of Kyushu, palm trees dot the shores of Kagoshima and Miyazaki. But the central axis of Japan's culture, economy, and polity has always been the temperate zone that stretches west to east, from northern Kyushu through Osaka and Kyoto to Tokyo and the Kantō plain.

Early Japan was remote. Off in the sea to the north of China, and east of Korea and Manchuria, it was known to the Chinese but chronicled only briefly in that country's dynastic histories—and with a mixture of fact and geographical uncertainty. Location would shape its later history as well. During the historical era, two centuries after the Normans conquered England, the far fiercer Mongols were unable to conquer Japan. The distance from the southern tip of the Korean peninsula to northwestern Kyushu is five times greater than that between France and England.

But proximity to the continent also mattered. Unlike the Galapagos or New Zealand, Japan has no unique fauna and flora. During the three most recent ice ages, much of the world's water was frozen at the poles and the level of the sea dropped 300 feet. During these periods, Japan, like England, became an extension of its continent: the Yellow Sea became land and the Sea of Japan an inland lake. During these or earlier ice ages, a continental fauna entered Japan. Woolly mammoths roamed Hokkaido until 20,000 B.C. Saber-toothed tigers, cave bears, giant elk, and Nauman's elephants crossed over into Kyushu, Shikoku, and Honshu. The peak of the last glaciation, between 20,000 and 13,000 B.C., was just when Clovis Man crossed over to the American continent. When did humans first enter Japan?

Jōmon Culture

Japanese hotly debate their origins. When a large prehistoric settlement was discovered in Aomori Prefecture in the far north of Honshu, it made the front page of newspapers throughout Japan. Bookstores have rows of books, most of them popular works, asking: Who are we and where did we come from? Conjecture abounds.

The earliest evidence of human habitation is finely shaped stone tools dating from about 30,000 B.C. Scholars think these were a part of an Old Stone Age hunting and



Along with the cord-patterned pots, the hunting and gathering Jōmon people produced mysterious figurines. Is this a female deity? Why are the eyes slitted like snow goggles? Earthenware with traces of pigment (Kamegoaka type); 24.8 cm high. [Asia Society, NY: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection]

gathering culture that spread from northeast Asia into Japan, Sakhalin, and the Kamchatka peninsula, and to North America as well. This culture may have first entered Japan during the last two ice ages. Beyond stone tools, however, little is known of these earliest peoples. Because Japan's acidic volcanic soil eats up bones, there are no skeletal remains earlier than 11,000 B.C. There may be a correlation, as in North America, between the establishment of this hunting and gathering society and the disappearance of the largest, prehistorical mammals from Japan. But this, too, is conjectural.

Then, from within this hunting and gathering society, in about 10,000 B.C., pottery developed. This is the oldest pottery in the world, older than any in the

4 Chapter 1 • Japanese History: Origins to the Twelfth Century

Middle East. Archeologists are baffled by its appearance since everywhere else pottery developed for the storage of crops as a part of agricultural revolutions. Scholars call this society the “Jōmon” after the rope-like, cord-pattern (*Jōmon*) designs on the pottery. In addition to elaborately decorated pots, marvelous figurines of animals and humans have also been found at Jōmon sites. Some of the latter, with slitted eyes like snow goggles, may depict female deities, but no one knows. We have no knowledge of Jōmon religion.

Hunting, fishing, and gathering can support only a sparse population. One scholar has described all population figures for premodern Japan as “the most imponderable of the imponderables,” and those for the Jōmon are certainly the most imponderable of all.¹ But a likely number is about 200,000, with the densest concentration on the Kantō plain in eastern Japan. Even today, Jōmon pottery shards are sometimes unearthed in Tokyo gardens. Jōmon kitchen middens (garbage heaps) at village sites often contain huge numbers of mussel shells. Excavations at such sites reveal that the people lived in pit dwellings with thatched roofs.

The Yayoi Revolution

A second northeast Asian people began migrations down the Korean peninsula and across the Tsushima Straits to Japan in about 300 B.C. Their movement may have been caused by Chinese military expansion and wars between China and nomadic chiefdoms to its north. These people are called the Yayoi, after a place-name in Tokyo where their distinctive hard, pale-orange pottery was first unearthed. The Yayoi were different from the Jōmon in language, appearance, and level of technology. There is no greater break in the entire Japanese record than that between the Jōmon and the Yayoi, for at the beginning of the third century B.C., the bronze, iron, and agricultural revolutions—which in the Near East, India, and China had been separated by thousands of years and each of which singly had wrought profound transformations—entered Japan simultaneously.

No issue bears more directly on the question of Japanese origins than the relationship between the Jōmon and the Yayoi, and their relationships to modern Japanese, Koreans, and Ainu. (The Ainu were a people living in Hokkaido, who until the last few centuries had a hunting and gathering economy.)

Physical anthropologists have long noted that skulls from early Yayoi sites in Kyushu and western Japan, where Yayoi peoples entered from Korea, differ markedly from Jōmon skulls, and are closer to the Japanese of today. Linguists note the astonishing similarity of Japanese and Korean syntax (and are puzzled by the dissimilarity of their vocabularies). The two languages must be somehow related. (Students at Harvard

¹W. W. Farris, *Japan's Medieval Population* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 267.

who already know Japanese, and thus have a leg up, have at times been offered a special accelerated course in Korean.) Recently, DNA studies have cast a surer light on these relationships, though the results are still preliminary and much debated.

The question is whether the Yayoi immigrants replaced the Jōmon, mixed with the Jōmon, or merely transmitted a new technology to a population that remained Jōmon in its primary gene pool. Studies of DNA recovered from Jōmon and Yayoi burial sites and comparisons with the DNA of modern populations tentatively suggest: (1) Modern

Chinese Historians' Comment on Late Yayoi Japan

The land of Wa is warm and mild. In winter as in summer the people live on raw vegetables and go about barefooted. They have houses; father and mother, elder and younger, sleep separately. They smear their bodies with pink and scarlet, just as the Chinese use powder. They serve food on bamboo and wooden trays, helping themselves with their fingers. When a person dies, they prepare a single coffin, without an outer one. They cover the graves with earth to make a mound. When death occurs, mourning is observed for more than ten days, during which period they do not eat meat. The head mourners wail and lament, while friends sing, dance, and drink liquor. When the funeral is over, all members of the family go into the water to cleanse themselves in a bath of purification.

In their meetings and in their deportment, there is no distinction between father and son or between men and women. They are fond of liquor. In their worship, men of importance simply clap their hands instead of kneeling or bowing. The people live long, some to one hundred and others to eighty or ninety years. Ordinarily, men of importance have four or five wives; the lesser ones, two or three. Women are not

loose in morals or jealous. There is no theft, and litigation is infrequent.

When the lowly meet men of importance on the road, they stop and withdraw to the roadside. In conveying messages to them or addressing them, they either squat or kneel, with both hands on the ground. This is the way they show respect. When responding, they say "ah," which corresponds to the affirmative "yes."

When they go on voyages across the sea to visit China, they always select a man who does not comb his hair, does not rid himself of fleas, lets his clothing get as dirty as it will, does not eat meat, and does not lie with women. This man behaves like a mourner and is known as the "mourning keeper." When the voyage meets with good fortune, they all lavish on him salves and other valuables. In case there is disease or mishap, they kill him, saying that he was not scrupulous in observing the taboos. . . .

From *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, by Ryusaku Tsunoda, Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene (eds.). Copyright © 1958 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

6 Chapter 1 • Japanese History: Origins to the Twelfth Century

Japanese are more like Yayoi and Koreans, than like the Jōmon. (2) Few Jōmon marker-genes are found in the population of central Japan, but more are found in the far north and far south, where the influx of Yayoi culture was slower. In those outlying areas, more genetic mingling occurred. (3) The present-day Ainu population of Hokkaido is genetically close to the Jōmon, though with an admixture of Japanese (Yayoi) genes.

The Spread of Yayoi Culture

Early Yayoi migrants, using the same oared boats by which they had crossed from the Korean peninsula, rapidly spread along the coasts of northern Kyushu and western Honshu. Within a century or two, Yayoi culture replaced Jōmon culture as far east in Japan as the present-day city of Nagoya—a city 100 miles northeast of Kyoto. After that, Yayoi culture diffused overland into eastern Japan more slowly and with greater difficulty. In the east, climatic conditions were less favorable for agriculture, and a mixed agricultural-hunting economy lasted longer.

Early Yayoi “frontier settlements” were located next to their fields. Their agriculture was primitive: They scattered rice seed in swampy areas and used “slash-and-burn” techniques to clear uplands. By the first century A.D., the Yayoi population had so expanded that wars were fought for the best land. Excavations have revealed extensive stone-axe industries and skulls pierced by bronze and iron arrowheads. An early Chinese chronicle describes Japan as being made up of “more than one hundred countries” with wars and conflicts raging on all sides. During these wars, villages were relocated to defensible positions on low hills away from the fields. From these wars, during the third and fourth centuries A.D., emerged a more peaceful order of regional tribal states with a ruling class of aristocratic warriors. Late Yayoi excavations reveal villages once again situated alongside fields and far fewer stone axes.

During the third century A.D., a queen named Pimiko achieved a temporary hegemony over a number of such warring regional states. In a Chinese chronicle, Pimiko is described as a shaman who “occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people.” She was mature but unmarried.

After she became the ruler, there were few who saw her. She had one thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink and acted as a medium of communication. She resided in a palace surrounded by towers and stockades with armed guards in a state of constant vigilance.²

After Pimiko, Japan disappears from Chinese dynastic histories for a century and a half.

²From *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Ryusaku Tsunoda, Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene (eds.). Copyright © 1958 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

Tomb Culture, the Yamato State, and Korea

Emerging directly from the early Yayoi culture was an era (300–600 A.D.) characterized by giant tomb mounds, which even today dot the landscape of the Yamato plain near present-day Osaka. Early tombs—patterned on those in Korea—were circular mounds of earth heaped up atop megalithic burial chambers. Later tombs were sometimes keyhole-shaped. The tombs were surrounded by moats and sometimes adorned with clay cylinders and figures of warriors, horses, scribes, musicians, houses, boats, and the like. Early tombs, like the Yayoi graves that preceded them, contained mirrors, bear-claw-shaped jewels, and other ceremonial objects. From the fifth century A.D., these objects were replaced by armor, swords, spears, and military trappings, probably reflecting a new wave of continental influences. The flow of people, culture, and technology from the Korean peninsula into Japan that began in 300 B.C. was continuous into historical times.

Japan reappeared in the Chinese chronicles in the fifth century A.D. This period was also treated in the earliest surviving Japanese accounts of their own history, *Records of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)* and *Records of Japan (Nihongi)*, compiled in 712 and 720. These several records dovetail with evidence from the tombs. The picture that emerges is of regional aristocracies under the loose hegemony of Yamato “great kings.” Historians use the geographic label “Yamato” because the courts of the great kings were located on the Yamato plain, the richest agricultural region of ancient Japan. The Yamato rulers also held lands and granaries in other parts of Japan. The largest tomb, possibly that of the great king Nintoku, is 486 meters long and 36 meters high, with twice the volume of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. By the fifth century A.D., the great kings possessed sufficient authority to commandeer laborers for such a project.

The great kings awarded Korean-type titles to court and regional aristocrats, titles that implied a national hierarchy centering on the Yamato court. That regional rulers had a similar kind of political authority over their populations can be seen in the spread of tomb mounds throughout Japan.

The basic social unit of Yamato aristocratic society was the extended family (*uji*), closer in size to a Scottish clan than to a modern household. Attached to these aristocratic families were groups of specialist workers called *be*. This word is of Korean origin and was originally used to designate potters, scribes, or others with special skills who had immigrated to Japan. It was then extended to include similar groups of indigenous workers and groups of peasants. Yamato society had a small class of slaves, possibly those captured in wars. Many peasants were neither slaves nor members of specialized workers’ groups.

What little is known of Yamato politics from the early Japanese histories suggests that the court was the scene of incessant struggles for power between aristocratic families. Although marriage alliances were established and titles awarded, rebellions were not infrequent during the fifth and sixth centuries. There were also continuing efforts by the court to control outlying regions. This resulted in constant wars with

8 Chapter 1 • Japanese History: Origins to the Twelfth Century



In 1972, Japanese archaeologists found this painting on the interior wall of a megalithic burial chamber at Takamatsuzuka in Nara Prefecture. The tomb dates to the 300–680 era and was covered with a mound of earth. The most sophisticated tomb painting found in Japan, it resembles paintings found in Korean and Chinese tombs. [Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz]

“barbarian tribes” in southern Kyushu and northeastern Honshu on the frontiers of “civilized” Japan.

Relations with Korea were critical to the Yamato court. During the fifth and sixth centuries, a three-cornered military balance developed on the Korean peninsula between the states of Paekche in the southwest, Silla in the east, and Koguryo in the north (see Map 1-1). Japan was an ally of Paekche and maintained extensive trade and



Map 1-1 Yamato Japan and Korea (ca. 500 A.D.). Paekche was Japan’s ally on the Korean peninsula. Silla, Japan’s enemy, was the state that would eventually unify Korea. (Note: Nara was founded in 710; Heian in 794.)

military relations with a weak southern federation known as the Kaya States. Scholars ask whether there was a cultural basis for these ties—like those of Norman England to Normandy.

The Paekche connection enabled the Yamato court to expand its power within Japan. Imports of iron weapons and tools gave it military strength. The migration to Japan of Korean potters, weavers, scribes, metalworkers, and other artisans increased its wealth and influence. The great cultural significance of these immigrants can be gauged by the fact that many became established as noble families. Paekche also served as a conduit for the first elements of Chinese culture to reach Japan. Chinese writing was adopted for the transcription of Japanese names during the fifth or sixth century. Confucianism entered in 513, when Paekche sent a “scholar of the Five Classics.” Buddhism arrived in 538, when a Paekche king sent a Buddha image, sutras, and possibly a priest.

Eventually, the political balance on the peninsula shifted. In 532, Paekche turned against Japan and joined Silla in attacking the Kaya States, which by 562 had

Darkness and the Cave of High Heaven

The younger brother of the Sun Goddess was a mischief maker. Eventually the gods drove him out of heaven. On one occasion, he knocked a hole in the roof of a weaving hall and dropped in a dappled pony that he had skinned alive. One weaving maiden was so startled that she struck her genitals with her shuttle and died.

What does this myth suggest regarding the social relations of the Shintō gods? Entering a cave and then reemerging signifies death and rebirth in the religions of many peoples. Does it here?

The Sun Goddess, terrified at the sight, opened the door of the heavenly rock cave, and hid herself inside. Then the Plain of High Heaven was shrouded in darkness, as was the Central Land of Reed Plains

[Japan]. An endless night prevailed. The cries of the myriad gods were like the buzzing of summer flies, and myriad calamities arose.

The eight hundred myriad gods assembled in the bed of the Quiet River of Heaven. They asked one god to think of a plan. They assembled the long-singing birds of eternal night and made them sing. They took hard rocks from the bed of the river and iron from the Heavenly Metal Mountain and called in a smith to make a mirror. They asked the Jewel Ancestor God to make an eight foot-long string of 500 carved jewels. They asked other gods to remove the shoulder blade of a male deer and to obtain cherry wood from Mount Kagu, and to perform a divination. They uprooted a sacred tree, attached the string of curved jewels to its upper branches, hung the large mirror from its middle

been gobbled up. In 665, Silla conquered Paekche. Japan feared an invasion by Silla, its erstwhile enemy, but an invasion never came. In the end, the rupture of ties with Korea was less of a loss than it would have been earlier, for by this time Japan had established direct relations with China.

Religion in Early Japan

The indigenous religion of Yamato Japan was an animistic worship of the forces of nature, later given the name of *Shintō*, or “the way of the gods,” to distinguish it from the newly arrived religion of Buddhism. Shinto probably entered Japan from the continent as a part of Yayoi culture. A similar religion existed in early Korea. The underlying forces of nature might be expressed by a waterfall, a twisted tree, a strangely shaped boulder, a mountain, or by a great leader who would be worshiped as a deity after his death. Mount Fuji was holy not as the abode of a god but because the

branches, and suspended offerings of white and blue cloth from its lower branches.

One god held these objects as grand offerings and another intoned sacred words. The Heavenly Hand-Strong-Male God stood hidden beside the door. A goddess bound up her sleeves with clubmoss from Mount Kagu, made a herb band from the spindle-tree, and bound together leaves of bamboo-grass to hold in her hands. Then she placed a wooden box facedown before the rock cave, stamped on it until it resounded, and, as if possessed, she exposed her breasts and pushed her shirt-band down to her genitals. The Plain of High Heaven shook as the myriad gods broke into laughter.

The Sun Goddess, thinking this strange, opened slightly the rock-cave door and said from within: “Since I have hidden myself I thought that the Plain of High Heaven and the Central Land of the Reed Plains would all be in darkness. Why is it

that the goddess makes merry and the myriad gods all laugh?”

The goddess replied: “We rejoice and are glad because there is here a god greater than you.” While she spoke two other gods brought out the mirror and held it up before the cave.

The Sun Goddess, thinking this stranger and stranger, came out the door and peered into the mirror. Then the Hand-Strong-Male God seized her hand and pulled her out. Another god drew a rope behind her and said: “You may not go back further than this.”

So when the Sun Goddess had come forth, the Plain of High Heaven and the Central Land of the Reed Plains were once again bathed in brightness.

From the *Records of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)*, translated by Albert Craig, with appreciation to Basil Hall Chamberlain and Donald L. Philippi.

mountain itself was an upwelling of a vital natural force. Even today in Japan, a gnarled tree trunk may be girdled with a straw rope and set aside as an object of veneration. The more potent forces of nature such as the sea, sun, wind, thunder, and lightning became personified as deities. The sensitivity to nature and natural beauty that pervades Japanese art and poetry may owe much to Shinto.

Throughout Japan's premodern history most villages had shamans—holy persons who, by entering a trance, could directly contact the inner forces of nature and gain the power to foretell the future or heal sickness. The queen Pimiko was such a shaman. The sorceress is also a stock figure in tales of ancient and medieval Japan. More often than not, women, receiving the command of a god, have founded the “new” religions in this tradition, even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A second aspect of early Shinto was its connection with the state and the ruling posttribal aristocracy. Each aristocratic clan possessed a genealogy tracing its descent from a nature deity (*kami*) that it claimed as its original ancestor. The clan genealogy was a patent of nobility and a title to political authority. The head of a clan, who was also its chief priest, made sacrifices to its deity. When the Yamato court unified Japan, it combined the myths of the leading clans into a composite national myth. The deity of the Yamato great kings was the sun goddess, so she became the chief deity, while other gods assumed lesser positions appropriate to the status of their clan. Had another clan won the struggle, its deity might have become paramount—perhaps a thunder god as in ancient Greece.

The *Records of Ancient Matters* and *Records of Japan* tell of the creation of Japan, of the deeds and misdeeds of gods on the “Plain of High Heaven,” and of their occasional adventures on earth or in the underworld. In mid-volume, the stories of the gods, interspersed with genealogies of noble families, give way to stories of early great kings and early history. These kings, and later emperors descended from them, were viewed as the lineal descendants of the Sun Goddess and as “living gods.” Whether the imperial line was in fact continuous during these early centuries is not known, but those who wrote the histories presented it as such. The Great Shrine of the Sun Goddess at Ise has been the most important in Japan throughout the historical era.

NARA AND HEIAN JAPAN

The second major turning point in Japanese history was its adoption of the high civilization of China. This is a prime example of the worldwide process by which early “heartland civilizations” spread into outlying areas. In Japan, the process occurred between the seventh and twelfth centuries and can best be understood in terms of three overlapping stages. During the seventh century, the Japanese learned about China, during the eighth, they implanted Chinese institutions in Japan, and after that,

Chronology

Early Japanese Prehistory

30,000–300 B.C. Old Stone Age Hunters and Gatherers
 (10,000–300 B.C. Jōmon pottery)

Continental Influences Down the Korean Corridor

300 B.C.–300 A.D. Yayoi Culture
 300 A.D.–600 A.D. Tomb Culture and the Yamato State

Borrowing from Tang China

600 A.D.–850 A.D. Yamato, Nara, and Early Heian Japan

they adapted the institutions to meet Japanese needs. By the eleventh century, the creative reworking of Chinese elements had led to distinctive Japanese forms, unlike those of China but equally unlike those of the earlier Yamato court.

Seventh Century Developments

Occasional embassies had been sent to China earlier but regular embassies were begun by Prince Shōtoku (574–622) in 607. The embassies included traders, students, and Buddhist monks, as well as the representatives of the Yamato great kings. Like Third World students who study abroad today, Japanese who studied in China played key roles in their own government when they returned home. They brought back with them a quickening flow of technology, art, Buddhist texts, and knowledge of Chinese legal and governmental systems. Shōtoku adopted the Chinese calendar and actively propagated Buddhism and Chinese notions of government.

A second seventh century figure, Fujiwara no Kamatari (614–669), came to power as a result of factional struggles between powerful clans (or *uji*) at the court. Beginning in the Taika “year period,” which started in 645, he initiated the so-called “Taika reforms.” Many of these, like his new law codes or strictures for the appointments of governors, existed mainly on paper, but they moved Japanese thinking in a Chinese direction. The difficulties faced by preliterate Yamato Japanese in learning Chinese and in comprehending China’s historical and philosophical culture were enormous

Large-scale institutional changes using the Tang model were begun in the late seventh century by the Emperor Temmu (r. 672–686) and his successor, the Empress Jitō (r. 686–692). Temmu’s life illustrates the interplay between Japanese power



Unlike the full-bodied Tang ideal, this *bodhisattva* from the pre-Nara Hōryūji Temple reflects the artistic influence of the earlier Northern Wei dynasty. The Tang style entered Japan during the Nara and early Heian periods. [Tokyo National Museum]

politics and the adoption of Chinese institutions. He came to the throne by leading an alliance of eastern clans in rebellion against the previous great king, who was his nephew. The *Records of Japan* describes Temmu as “walking like a tiger through the eastern lands.” (This was a Chinese expression; there were no longer tigers in Japan.) He then used Chinese systems to consolidate his power. He rewarded his

supporters with new court ranks and positions in a new court government, both patterned on the Tang template. He extended the authority of the court, and increased its revenues by a survey of agricultural lands and a census of their population. He promulgated a Chinese-type law code that greatly augmented the powers of the ruler. He styled himself as the “heavenly emperor” (*tennō*), a term used thereafter in place of “great king.” In short, although the court must have immensely admired things Chinese, much of the borrowing was dictated by specific, immediate, and practical goals.

Nara and Early Heian Governments

Until the eighth century, the capital usually moved each time an emperor died. Then, in 710, a new capital, intended to be permanent, was established at Nara. It was laid out on a checkerboard grid like the Chinese capital at Chang’an. But then, it moved again—some say to escape the meddling in politics of powerful Buddhist temples. A final move occurred in 794 to Heian (later Kyoto) on the plain north of Nara. This site remained the capital until the move to Tokyo in 1869. Even today, the regular geometry of Kyoto’s streets reflects Chinese city planning.

The superimposition of a Chinese-type capital on a stillbackward Japan produced as stark a contrast as any in history. In the villages, peasants—who worshiped the forces in mountains and trees—lived in pit dwellings and either planted in crude paddy fields or used slash-and-burn techniques of dryland farming. In the capital stood pillared palaces in which dwelt the emperor and nobles, descended from the gods on high. They drank wine, wore silk, composed poetry, and enjoyed the paintings, perfumes, and pottery of the Tang. Clustered about the capital were Buddhist temples, more numerous than in Nara, with soaring pagodas and sweeping tile roofs. With what awe and envy must a peasant have viewed the city and its inhabitants!

Governments at the Nara and Heian courts were headed by emperors, who were at the same time Confucian rulers with the majesty accorded by Chinese law, Shinto rulers descended from the sun goddess, and Buddhist kings. Protected by an aura of the sacred, their lineage was never usurped. All Japanese history constitutes a single dynasty, although not a few emperors were killed and replaced by other family members in succession struggles.

Beneath the emperor, the same modified Chinese pattern prevailed. At the top was the Council of State, a powerful office from which leading clans manipulated the authority of an emperor who reigned but did not rule. Beneath this council were eight ministries—two more than in China. One of the extra ministries was a Secretariat, the other an Imperial Household Ministry. Size affected function. Tang China had a population of 60 million; Nara Japan had only 5 or so million. Since there were fewer people to govern in Japan and no external enemies, much of local rule, in the Yamato

tradition, was in the hands of local clans, and more of the business of court government was with the court itself. Of the 6,000 persons in the central ministries, more than 4,000 were concerned in one way or another with the care of the imperial house. The Imperial Household Ministry, for example, had an official staff of 1,296, whereas the Treasury had but 305 and Military Affairs only 198.

Local government was handled by sixty-odd provinces, which were further subdivided into districts and villages. In pre-Nara times, these outlying areas had been governed in Yamato fashion by regional clans, but under the new system, provincial governors were sent out from the capital—leaving local aristocrats to occupy the lesser position of district magistrate. This substantially increased the power of the court.

Japanese court government differed from that of China in fundamental respects: There were no eunuchs to guard the wives of the emperor—and interfere in court affairs. Bloodline may have been less important because the social distance between emperor and nobles was small. In *The Tale of Genji*, neither Genji nor Prince Kaoru was sired by his nominal father. Japan had little of the tension that existed in China between emperor and bureaucracy—the main struggles at the Japanese court were between clans. The shift from aristocracy toward an examination-based meritocracy that had occurred during the Tang and Song dynasties was also absent in Japan. Apart from clerks and monastics, only aristocrats were educated, and only they were appointed to important official posts. Family counted more than grades. A feeble attempt to establish an examination elite on the Chinese model failed completely.

A Japanese Pattern of Government

The last Japanese embassy to China was in 839. By that time, the zealous borrowing of Chinese culture had already slowed; the Japanese had taken in all they needed—or, perhaps, all they could handle—and were sufficiently self-confident to use Chinese ideas in innovative and flexible ways. The 350 years that followed until the end of the twelfth century were a time of assimilation and evolutionary change. Nowhere was this more visible than in government.

Even during the Nara period, the elaborate apparatus of Chinese government, as we have seen, was too much. In the words of a Chinese proverb, it was like using an axe to carve a chicken. In the early Heian period, the actual functions of government were taken over by three new offices outside the Chinese system:

Audit officers. A newly appointed provincial governor had to report on the accounts of his predecessor. Agreement was rare, so from the end of the Nara period, audit officers were sent to examine the books. By early Heian times, these auditors had come to superintend the collection of taxes and most other

Who Ruled at the Nara and Heian Courts

710–856	Emperors and nobles
856–1086	Fujiwara nobles
1086–1156	Retired emperors

capital–province relationships. They tried to halt the erosion of tax revenues. But as the quota and estate systems grew, this office had less and less to do.

Bureau of archivists. This bureau was established in 810 to record and preserve imperial decrees. Eventually it took over the executive function at the Heian court, drafting imperial decrees and attending to all aspects of the emperor’s life.

Police commissioners. Established in the second decade of the ninth century to enforce laws and prosecute criminals, the commissioners eventually became responsible for all law and order in the capital. They also absorbed military functions as well as those of the Ministry of Justice and the Bureau of Impeachment.

While these new offices were evolving, shifts of power occurred at the apex of the Heian court.

The emperor remained the key figure, since he had the power of appointments and ruled by decree. Until the early Heian—say, the mid-ninth century—some emperors actually wielded power or, more often, shared power with nobles from leading clans.

From 856, the northern branch of the Fujiwara clan became preeminent, and from 986 to 1086, its stranglehold on the court was absolute. The private offices of the Fujiwara house were as powerful as those of the central government, and the Fujiwara monopolized all key government posts. They controlled the court by marrying their daughters to the emperor, forcing the emperor to retire after a son was born, and then ruling as regents for the infant emperor. At times, they even ruled as regents for adult emperors. Fujiwara Michinaga’s words were no empty boast when he said, “As for this world, I think it is mine, nor is there a flaw in the full moon.”

Fujiwara rule gave way, during the second half of the eleventh century, to 70 years of rule by retired emperors. The imperial family and lesser noble houses had resented Fujiwara domination for more than two centuries. When disputes broke out within the Fujiwara house itself, Emperor Shirakawa seized control of the court. He reigned from 1072 to 1086 and then, abdicating at the age of 33, ruled for 43 years as retired

emperor. After his death, another retired emperor ruled in the same pattern until 1156. The offices that Retired Emperor Shirakawa set up in his quarters were not unlike those of the Fujiwara. He appointed talented non-Fujiwara nobles to government posts and sought to reduce the number of tax-free estates by confiscating those of the Fujiwara. He failed in this attempt and instead garnered huge new estates for the imperial family. He also developed strong ties to regional military leaders. His sense of his own power was reflected in his words—both a boast and a lament: “The only things that do not submit to my will are the waters of the Kamo River, the roll of the dice, and the soldier-monks [of the Tendai temple on Mount Hiei to the northeast of Kyoto].”

But the power of the retired emperors was exercised in a capital city that was increasingly isolated from the provinces, and even the city itself was plagued by fires, banditry, and a sense of impending catastrophe.

People, Land, and Taxes

The life of the common people of Japan remained harsh during the Nara and Heian periods. Estimates of the early Nara population suggest slightly more than 5 million persons; by the end of the Heian period, almost half a millennium later, the number had increased to only about 6 million. Why had population not grown more during these fairly peaceful centuries? One reason is that agricultural technology improved only slightly. Wooden plows were still in use. Another was the frequency of droughts, which caused frequent famines. A third was the effect of continental germs—introduced by embassies or trade—on a previously isolated Japanese population that had not yet developed immunities. Periodic epidemics swept the court and village communities alike.

Taxes were a heavy burden on village populations, and tax systems, like government, evolved over time. In the Nara and early Heian periods, the problem for peasants was to obtain land. The problem for the government, imperial family, nobles, and temples was to find labor to work their extensive landholdings. The solution was the inappropriately named “equal-field system” of Tang China.

Under this system, the imperial house, nobles, and temples kept their estates, but the rest of the land was distributed (and redistributed every 5 years) to all able-bodied persons. (Women received two-thirds of the allowance of men.) In return, they paid three taxes: a light tax in grain, a light tax in local products such as cloth or fish, and a heavy labor tax. But in order to levy these taxes, it was necessary to know how many persons there were and where they were, and this necessitated detailed population and land registers. Even in China with its sophisticated bureaucracy, the equal-field system broke down. In Japan, the marvel is that it could be carried out at all. Old registers and

recent aerial photographs suggest that in regions near the capital, at least for a time, it was implemented. Its implementation speaks of the immense energy and ability of the early Japanese, who so quickly absorbed Chinese administrative techniques.

In Japan, the equal-field system broke down early. Whenever change in a society is imposed from above, the results tend to be uniform, but when changes occur willy-nilly within a social system, the results are messy and difficult to comprehend. The evolution of taxation in Heian Japan was of the latter type. Yet the change was so basic to other developments in the society that an attempt must be made to describe it.

Simply put, taxes shifted from the cultivator to the land, from elaborate central records to simple local records, and from an official system to a semiofficial “quota” system. The changes occurred in a series of steps: (1) Officials discovered that peasants would not care for land they did not own, so they abolished the redistribution of land and made holdings hereditary. (2) Officials lamented that the labor offered in payment of taxes was unskilled and unenthusiastic, so they converted the labor tax to a grain tax, and used the grain to purchase skilled labor as needed. (3) Unable to maintain elaborate records, officials gave each governor a quota of tax rice to send to the court, and each governor in turn gave quotas to the district magistrates in his province. These local officials kept only the simple records of landowning needed to collect taxes. (4) A consequence of the quota system was that local officials kept any taxes they collected beyond the set quotas. They used the “surplus” to maintain local law and order. In time, the magistrates, local notables, and military families associated with them took on a military character.

A second change, affecting about half of the land in Japan, was the conversion of tax-paying lands to tax-free estates known as *shōen*. Court nobles and powerful temples used their influence at the court to obtain *immunities*—exemptions from taxation for their lands. From the ninth century, small cultivators commended their holdings to such nobles or temples, figuring they would be better off as serfs on tax-free estates than as free farmers subject to rapacious governors and magistrates. Since the pattern of commendation was random, the typical estate in Japan was composed of scattered parcels of land, unlike the unified estates of medieval Europe. The noble owners appointed stewards from among local notables to manage their estates. The stewards took a small slice of the cultivators’ surplus for themselves, and forwarded the rest to the noble or priestly owner in Kyoto. Since stewards were from the same stratum of local society as district magistrates, they shared an interest in upholding the local order.

Rise of the Samurai

Japan faced no powerful nomadic armies on its borders. Its military had only to police Japan. During the Nara period, Japan followed the Chinese model and conscripted about a third of all able-bodied men between the ages of 21 and 60. The

conscript army, however, proved inefficient, so in 792, two years before the Heian period began, the court decided to recruit, instead, local mounted warriors. In return for military service, these warriors paid no taxes. Some were stationed in the capital and others in provinces. The Japanese verb “to serve” is *samurau*, so those who served became *samurai*—the noun form of the verb. Then, from the mid-Heian period, the officially recruited warriors were replaced by unofficial bands of local warriors. These private bands would constitute the military of Japan for the next half millennium or so, until the foot-soldier revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Being a samurai was expensive. Horses, armor, and weapons were costly and their use required long training. The primary weapon was the bow and arrow, used from the saddle. Most samurai were from well-to-do local families—magistrates, estate stewards, local notables, or the military families associated with them. Their initial function was to preserve the local order and, when necessary, to help collect taxes. But from early on, they contributed to disorder. From the second half of the ninth century, there are accounts of district magistrates leading local forces against provincial governors, doubtless in connection with tax disputes. Some samurai estate stewards had



The Heiji War of 1159–1160 ended the era of rule by retired emperors and began a new era. This is a scene of the burning of the Sanjō Palace. Handscroll; ink and colors on paper, 41.3 × 699.7 cm. [Courtesy of Boston. Fenollosa-Weld Collection Museum of Fine Arts]

close ties with court nobles whose lands they oversaw. These ties enabled court factions to call on warrior bands for support.

In the early tenth century, regional military coalitions or confederations began to form. They first broke into history in 935–940, when a regional military leader, a descendant of an emperor, became involved in a tax dispute. He captured several provinces, called himself the new emperor, and appointed a government of civil and military officials. The Kyoto court responded by recruiting as its champion another military band. The rebellion was quelled and the rebel leader died in battle. That the Kyoto court could summon a military band points up the connections that enabled it to manipulate local military leaders and maintain its control over Japan.

Other regional wars followed. Many wars were fought in eastern Japan—the “wild east” of those days. The east was more militarized because it was the locale for periodic campaigns against tribal peoples to the north. By the middle of the twelfth century, regional military bands existed in every part of Japan.

ARISTOCRATIC CULTURE AND BUDDHISM

If the parts of a culture could be put on a scale and weighed like sugar or flour, we would conclude that the culture of Nara and early Heian Japan was overwhelmingly one of Shinto religious practices and village folkways, an extension of the culture of the late Yamato period. The Heian aristocracy was small, about one-tenth of 1 percent of Japan’s population, and was encapsulated in the routines of court life, as were Buddhist monks in the rounds of their monastic life. Most of court culture had only recently been imported from China. There had not been time for commoners to ape their betters or for the powerful force of the indigenous culture to reshape that of the elite. (Exceptions come readily to mind, such as possession by the spirit of another in *The Tale of Genji*.)

The resulting cultural gap helps to explain why the aristocrats, insofar as we can tell from literature, found commoners to be odd, incomprehensible, and, indeed, hardly human. The writings of the courtiers reflect little sympathy for the suffering and hardships of the people—except in Chinese-style poetry, where such feelings were expected. When the fictional Prince Genji stoops to an affair with an impoverished woman, she is inevitably a princess. Sei Shōnagon, who wrote the *Pillow Book*, was not atypical as a writer: she was offended by the vulgarity of mendicant nuns; laughed at an illiterate old man whose house had burned down; and found lacking in charm the eating habits of carpenters, who wolfed down their food a bowl at a time.

Heian high culture resembled a hothouse plant. It was protected by the political influence of the court. It was nourished by the flow of taxes and estate income.

Sense and Sensibility at the Fujiwara Court: *Sei Shōnagon* Records Her Likes and Dislikes

Here are some passages describing the rarefied taste of the Heian court. They are from *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, one of the masterpieces of Heian Japan.

In what sense can a literary work such as this also be considered a historical document? What kind of information can it provide about court life?

Elegant Things

A white coat worn over a violet waistcoat.
Duck eggs.
Shaved ice mixed with liana syrup and put
in a new silver bowl.
A rosary of rock crystal.
Snow on wistaria or plum blossoms.
A pretty child eating strawberries.

Features That I Particularly Like

Someone has torn up a letter and thrown it away. Picking up the pieces, one finds that many of them can be fitted together.

A person in whose company one feels awkward asks one to supply the opening or closing line of a poem. If one happens to recall it, one is very pleased. Yet often on such occasions one completely forgets something that one would normally know.

Entering the Empress's room and finding that ladies-in-waiting are crowded round her in a tight group, I go next to a pillar which is some distance from where she is sitting. What a delight it is when Her Majesty summons me to her side so that all the others have to make way!

Hateful Things

A lover who is leaving at dawn announces that he has to find his fan and his paper. "I know I put them somewhere last night," he says. Since it is pitch dark, he gropes about the room, bumping into the furniture and muttering, "Strange! Where on earth can they be?" Finally he discovers the objects. He thrusts the paper into the breast of his robe with a great rustling sound; then he snaps open his fan and busily fans away with it. Only now is he ready to take his leave. What charmless behavior! "Hateful" is an understatement.

A good lover will behave as elegantly at dawn as at any other time. He drags himself out of bed with a look of dismay on his face. The lady urges him on: "Come, my friend, it's getting light. You don't want anyone to find you here." He gives a deep sigh, as if to say that the night has not been

Under these conditions, the aristocrats of the never-never land of Prince Genji indulged in a unique way of life and created canons of elegance and taste that are striking even today. The speed with which Tang culture was assimilated and reworked was amazing. A few centuries after Mediterranean culture had been introduced into northwestern Europe, there had appeared only *The Song of Roland*, a work not remotely comparable to *The Tale of Genji* or *The Pillow Book*.

nearly long enough and that it is agony to leave. Once up, he does not instantly pull on his trousers. Instead he comes close to the lady and whispers whatever was left unsaid during the night. Even when he is dressed, he still lingers, vaguely pretending to be fastening his sash.

Presently he raises the lattice, and the two lovers stand together by the side door while he tells her how he dreads the coming day, which will keep them apart; then he slips away. The lady watches him go, and this moment of parting will remain among her most charming memories.

In Spring It Is the Dawn

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!

In autumn the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one's heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season's mood! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

Things That Have Lost Their Power

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air.

The retreating figure of a sumo wrestler who has been defeated in a match.

A woman, who is angry with her husband about some trifling matter, leaves home and goes somewhere to hide. She is certain that he will rush about looking for her; but he does nothing of the kind and shows the most infuriating indifference. Since she cannot stay away for ever, she swallows her pride and returns.

From *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, trans. by Ivan Morris. Copyright © 1991 by Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Chinese Literature in Japan

Education at the Nara and Heian courts was largely a matter of reading Chinese books and acquiring the skills needed to compose poetry and prose in Chinese. These were daunting tasks, not only because there was no prior tradition of scholarship in Japan but also because the two languages were so dissimilar. To master written

Chinese and use it for everyday written communications was as great a challenge for the Nara Japanese as it would have been for a European of the same century.

But the challenge was met. From the Nara period until the nineteenth century, most philosophical and legal writings as well as most of the histories, essays, and religious texts in Japan were written in Chinese. From a Chinese perspective, the writings may leave something to be desired. It would be astonishing if this were not the case, for the soul of language is the music of the spoken tongue. But the Japanese writers were competent, and the feelings they expressed were authentic—when not copybook exercises in the style of a Chinese master. In 883, when Sugawara Michizane wrote a poem on the death of his son, he naturally wrote it in Chinese. The poem began:

Since Amaro died I cannot sleep at night;
if I do, I meet him in dreams and tears come coursing down.
Last summer he was over three feet tall;
this year he would have been seven years old.
He was diligent and wanted to know how to be a good son,
Read his books and recited by heart the “Poem on the Capital.”³

The capital was Chang’an; the poem was one “used in Japan by all little boys learning to read Chinese.”

Japanese writings in Chinese and original Chinese works, too, shaped the Japanese cultural tradition. The late Tang poet Bo Zhuyi was widely read and appreciated, as were Du Fu and Li Bo. Despite the many differences between the two societies, Chinese history became the mirror in which Japan saw itself, and Chinese heroes and villains became the stock figures of the Japanese historical consciousness. Buddhist stories and the books of Confucianism were also consulted over the centuries for their wisdom and moral guidance. The parallel might be the acceptance of such “foreign books” as the Bible and those by Plato and Aristotle in medieval and Renaissance England.

Birth of Japanese Literature

Stimulated by Chinese models, and drawing on a tradition of song, the Japanese began to compose poetry in their native tongue. The first major anthology was the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves* (*Man’yōshū*), compiled in about 760. It contains 4,516 poems. The poems are fresh, sometimes simple and straightforward, but often sophisticated. They reveal a deep sensitivity to nature and strong human relationships

³H. Sato and B. Watson, trans., *From the Country of Eight Islands* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 121.

The Development of Japanese Writing

No two languages could be more different than Chinese and Japanese. For Japanese to write in Chinese characters would be as if the early English had written in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Chinese is monosyllabic, uninflected, and tonal. Japanese is polysyllabic, highly inflected, and atonal. To adopt Chinese writing for use in Japanese was thus no easy task. What the Japanese did at first—when they were not simply learning to write in Chinese—was to use certain Chinese ideographs as a phonetic script. For example, in the *Man'yōshū*, the eighth century poetic anthology, *shira-nami* (white wave) was written with 之 for *shi*, 良 for *ra*, 奈 for *na*, and 美 *mi*, ignoring their original Chinese meaning. Over several centuries, these phonetic ideographs evolved into a uniquely Japanese phonetic script:

	Original Chinese Ideograph	Simplified Ideograph	Phonetic Script (<i>kana</i>)
<i>Shi</i>	之	之	し
<i>Ra</i>	良	良	ら
<i>Na</i>	奈	奈	な
<i>Mi</i>	美	美	み

It is apparent from these examples how the original ideograph was first simplified according to the rules of calligraphy and was then further simplified into a phonetic script known as *kana*. In modern Japanese, Chinese ideographs are used for nouns and verb stems, and the phonetic script is used for inflections and particles.

学生は図書館へ行きました。

Student/as for/library/to/went.
(The student went to the library.)

In this modern Japanese sentence, the Chinese ideographs are the forms with many strokes, and the phonetic script is shown in the simpler, cursive forms.

between husband and wife and parents and children. They also display a love for the land of Japan and links to a Shinto past.

An early obstacle to the development of Japanese poetry was the difficulty of transcribing Japanese sounds. In *Ten Thousand Leaves*, Chinese characters were used as phonetic symbols, but there was no standardization, and the transcription soon became unintelligible. In 951, when an empress wished to read it, a committee of poets deciphered the work and put it into *kana*, the new syllabic script that had been developed during the ninth century. The second major anthology was the *Collection of Ancient and Modern Times*, compiled in 905. It was written entirely in *kana*.

The invention of *kana* opened the gate to the most brilliant achievements of the Heian period. Most of the new works and certainly the greatest were by women, as most men were busy writing Chinese. One genre of writing was the diary or travel diary. An outstanding example was the *Izumi Shikibu Diary*, in which the court lady Izumi Shikibu reveals her tempestuous loves through a record of poetic exchanges.

The greatest works of the period, noted earlier, were by Sei Shōnagon and Murasaki Shikibu. Both were daughters of provincial officials serving at the Heian court. *The Pillow Book* contains sharp, satirical, amusing essays and literary jottings that reveal the demanding aristocratic taste of the early eleventh century Heian court, where, as Sir George Sansom wrote, “religion became an art and art a religion.”⁴

The *Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki Shikibu in about 1008, was the world’s first novel. Emerging out of a short tradition of lesser works in which prose provided a setting for poetry, *The Tale of Genji* is a work of sensitivity, originality, and acute psychological delineation of character, for which there was no Chinese model. It tells of the life, loves, and sorrows of Prince Genji, the son of an imperial concubine, and, after his death, of his son Kaoru. The novel spans three quarters of a century and is quasi-historical in nature, although the court society it describes is more emperor-centered than the Fujiwara age in which Murasaki lived.

The book may be seen as having had a “definite and serious purpose.” In one passage, Genji twits a court lady whom he finds absorbed in reading an extravagant romance. She is “hardly able to lift her eyes from the book in front of her.” But then Genji relents and says,

I think far better of this art than I have led you to suppose. Even its practical value is immense. Without it what should we know of how people lived in the past, from the Age of the Gods down to the present day? For history books such as the *Chronicles of Japan* show us only one small corner of life; whereas these diaries and romances, which I see piled around you contain, I am sure, the most minute information about all sorts of people’s private affairs.⁵

Buddhism

The historical Buddha was born a princeling in a Nepalese hill kingdom in the sixth or fifth century B.C. After a youth lived in luxury, he became aware of disease and death at age 29 and renounced the world to seek enlightenment through austerity and

⁴G. Sansom, *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 239.

⁵R. Tsunoda, W. T. de Bary, and D. Keene, eds., *Sources of the Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 181.

meditation. Eventually he found the “middle way” and attained nirvana or enlightenment at the age of 36. In this legend, all of the cosmic drama of salvation is compressed into the human figure meditating under the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya. He spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching the truths that he had learned: All of life is suffering, and suffering does not end at the grave, for each person is reborn, time and again, at higher or lower planes of existence according to his moral behavior in the previous life. All people, in short, are chained to the wheel of karma, of cosmic causation, and can obtain release only by the full realization of their deepest nature.

Buddhism began as a reform movement within Hinduism. In India, it gradually developed philosophies, sects, and cosmic Buddhas who were worshiped as gods. Eventually, it became almost indistinguishable from Hinduism and died out as a separate sect. But in the meantime, it had spread west to communities within the Hellenistic world, to southern India and southeast Asia, and north to Tibet and Central Asia, and then along the Silk Road to China, Korea, and finally Japan. Buddhist philosophy, sutras (sacred books), and sects came to Japan in their Chinese garb.

The six sects that entered Japan during the Nara period, for example, each represented a separate sect and philosophical doctrine within Mahayana Buddhism, the type of Buddhism that had spread from India to China, Vietnam, and Korea. Their monks trained as religious specialists in monastic communities set apart from the larger society. They studied, read sutras, copied texts, meditated, and joined in rituals. The typical monastery was a self-contained community with a golden hall for worship, a pagoda that housed a relic or sutra, a bell that rang the hours of the monastic regimen, a lecture hall, a refectory, toilets, and dormitories with monks' cells.

As in China, monasteries and temples were directly tied in with the state, which assigned tax revenues for their support. In 741, the government established temples in every province. Monks reading sutras, it was felt, would protect the country. Monks prayed for the health of the emperor and for rain in time of drought. The Temple of the Healing Buddha (Yakushiji) was built by an emperor when his consort fell ill. In China, to protect tax revenues and the family, laws had been enacted to limit the number of monks and nuns. In Nara Japan, where Buddhism spread only slowly outside the capital area, the same laws took on a prescriptive force. What had been a limit in China became a goal in Japan. Thus, though the involvement of the state was patterned on that of China, its role was supportive.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, Japan was less culturally developed than China. Japanese came to Buddhism not from the philosophical perspectives of Confucianism or Taoism but from the magic and mystery of Shinto. The appeal of Buddhism to the early Japanese was, consequently, in its colorful and elaborate rituals, in the gods, demons, and angels of the Mahayana pantheon, and, above all, in the beauty of Buddhist art. The philosophy took longer to establish itself. The speed with which the Japanese mastered the construction of temples with elaborate wooden

brackets and gracefully arching tile roofs, as well as the serene beauty of Nara Buddhist sculpture, wall paintings, and lacquer temple altars, was no less an achievement than their establishment of a political system based on the T'ang codes.

Japan's cultural identity was also different. In China, Buddhism was always viewed as Indian and alien. Its earliest Buddha statues, like those of northwestern India, looked Greek. That Buddhism was part of a non-Chinese culture was one factor leading to the Chinese persecution of Buddhists during the ninth century. In contrast, Japan's cultural identity or cultural self-consciousness took shape only during the Nara and early Heian periods. One element in that identity was the imperial cult derived from Shinto. But as a religion, Shinto was no match for Buddhism. The Japanese were aware that Buddhism was foreign, but it was no more so than Confucianism and all the rest of the Tang culture that had helped reshape the Japanese identity, so there was no particular bias against it. As a result, Buddhism entered deeply into Japanese culture and retained its vitality longer. Not until the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries did a few Japanese scholars become so Confucian as to be anti-Buddhist.

In 794, the court moved to Heian. Buddhist temples soon became as entrenched in the new capital as they had been in Nara. The two great, new Buddhist sects of the Heian era were Tendai and Shingon.

The monk Saichō (766–822) had founded a temple on Mount Hiei to the northwest of Kyoto in 785, nine years before the Heian period began. He went to China as a student monk in 804 and returned the following year with the syncretic teachings of the Tendai sect (*Tiantai* in Chinese). They were syncretic in that they combined rituals, sutra study, and seated meditation. Saichō instituted strict monastic rules and a 12-year training curriculum for novice monks at his mountain monastery. But he also preached that salvation was not solely for monastic specialists: all persons who led lives of contemplation and moral purity could attain it. Over the next few centuries, the sect grew until thousands of temples had been built on Mount Hiei. Mount Hiei remained a center of Japanese Buddhism until it was destroyed in the wars of the sixteenth century. Many later Japanese sects emerged from the Tendai fold, stressing one or another of its doctrines.

The Shingon sect was begun by Kūkai (774–835), who as a youth had studied Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism at the court university. Deciding that Buddhism was superior, he became a monk at the age of 18, and in 804, he went to China with Saichō. He returned 2 years later bearing Shingon doctrines and founded a monastery on Mount Kōya to the south of the Nara plain and far from the new capital. Kūkai was an extraordinary figure: a bridge builder, a poet, an artist, and one of the three great calligraphers of his age. He is sometimes credited with inventing the *kana* syllabary and with introducing tea into Japan.

Shingon doctrines center on an eternal and cosmic Buddha, of whom all other Buddhas are manifestations. *Shingon* means “true word” or “mantra,” a verbal formula

with mystical powers. It is sometimes called *esoteric Buddhism* because it had secret teachings that were passed from master to disciple. In China, Shingon had died out as a sect in the persecutions of the mid-ninth century, but in Japan, it was tremendously successful. Its doctrines even spread to the Tendai temples on Mount Hiei. Part of the appeal was in its air of mystery and its complex rituals involving signs, the manipulation of religious objects, and mandalas—maps of the cosmic Buddhist universe.

During the later Heian period, Buddhism became assimilated. At the village level, the folk religion of Shinto took in Buddhist elements. In the high culture of the capital, Shinto was almost entirely absorbed into Buddhism. Shinto deities came to be seen as the local manifestations of universal Buddhas. The “Great Sun Buddha” of the Shingon sect, for example, was easily identified with the sun goddess. Often, great Buddhist temples had smaller Shinto shrines on their grounds. The Buddha watched over Japan; the shrine deity guarded the temple itself. Not until the mid-nineteenth century was Shinto disentangled from Buddhism, and then for political ends.

EARLY JAPAN IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A fair question to ask of any civilization is how many historical (or prehistorical) layers it has and how each layer relates to the next. In Japan, the first, the longest lasting, and certainly the most deeply buried layer was the Jōmon. Excavating village sites, cemeteries, and kitchen middens, archaeologists have pieced together a picture of material life in a hunting, fishing, and gathering society. Yet we know next to nothing of Jōmon culture, language, or spiritual life. Nor can we specify the Jōmon contributions to the era that followed, though doubtless there were some in northern and southern Japanese villages.

The Yayoi layer is an altogether different story. In four key areas, the Yayoi imprint remains indelible in subsequent Japanese civilization, though each area underwent further transformations: the language of the Yayoi people became Japanese; their religion became Shinto; their agricultural settlements, though primitive, were the start of a village tradition that continued into the twentieth century; and their leaders began the pattern of rule by aristocrats that continued to the nineteenth century.

The third historical layer, the Chinese, had so broad and deep an influence that to detail its contribution would require a recapitulation of Japanese history. Here we will merely point out that this Nara–Heian layer was geographically variable. In Kyoto (Heian) and the capital region of western Japan, it was dense and rich. *The Tale of Genji* describes a way of life that was literate, self-confident, sophisticated, and elegant—wholly unlike that of the countryside. In the provinces, despite government offices and temples, Nara–Heian high culture was thin. A court noble might have welcomed an appointment as a provincial governor as an opportunity to recoup his family fortunes.

But the price he paid was to live for several years in a society he viewed as rude and backward. Attempts were made to reproduce Heian culture in outlying areas—Hiraizumi in the far north comes to mind—but in general, provincial contributions to Japan’s higher culture were small during this era. In Aomori in northernmost Honshu, for instance (Hokkaido was not then a part of Japan), some pottery of the twelfth century still resembled Jōmon ware. Traveling outward from the capital was traveling backward in time.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Were the changes from Jōmon to Yayoi society greater than those from the Yayoi to the early Heian? In making a judgment, what criteria might be used?
2. How was Yayoi society shaped by its eastern frontier? What changes in this society led to the building of tombs and the emergence of the Yamato great kings?
3. Did Nara and Heian Japanese borrow “Chinese civilization,” or were they just borrowing “civilization”? Is it worthwhile making this distinction? Did Japan fundamentally change what it borrowed?
4. How does Buddhism differ from Shinto? What features of Buddhism account for its acceptance in Japan?
5. New systems of taxation and government evolved in the early Heian period out of Tang-type institutions. Did Japanese literature evolve in a parallel fashion? Give concrete examples.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- M. ADOLPHSON, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (2000). A new interpretation stressing the importance of temples in the political life of Heian and Kamakura Japan.
- B. L. BATTEN, *To the Ends of Japan: Premodern Frontiers, Boundaries, and Interactions* (2003).
- C. BLACKER, *The Catalpa Bow* (1975). A fascinating and sympathetic study of contemporary folk Shinto, a religion with roots in ancient Japan.
- R. BORGES, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (1986). A study of a famous courtier and poet.
- D. BROWN, ed., Vol. 1 of the *Cambridge History of Japan: Ancient Japan* (1993). A multi-author volume.
- M. COLLCUTT, *Five Mountains* (1980). Study of Zen monasticism.
- T. D. CONLON, *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth Century Japan* (2003).
- E. CRANSTON, *The Secret Island and the Enticing Flame* (2009). Translations of early Japanese poetry.

- W. W. FARRIS, *Sacred Texts and Buried Treasures* (1998). Studies of Japan's prehistory and early history, based on recent Japanese research.
- W. W. FARRIS, *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500–1300* (1992). A study in depth of the subject.
- W. W. FARRIS, *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan, 645–900* (1985). An innovative reinterpretation of early history.
- K. F. FRIDAY, *The First Samurai* (2008). A study of the rebellion by Taira Masakado in the tenth century.
- K. F. FRIDAY, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (1991). The interpretation in this book may be compared to that in Farris's *Heavenly Warriors*.
- J. W. HALL, *Government and Local Power in Japan, 500–1700: A Study Based on Bizen Province* (1966). One of the finest books on Japanese history to 1700.
- D. KEENE, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature from the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1955). A basic source for the period included in this chapter as well as for later periods.
- T. LAMARRE, *Uncovering Heian Japan: An Archeology of Sensation and Inscription* (2000).
- I. H. LEVY, *The Ten Thousand Leaves* (1981). A fine translation of Japan's earliest collection of poetry.
- I. MORRIS, trans., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shnagon* (1967). Incisive observations of Heian court life by the Jane Austen of ancient Japan.
- S. MURASAKI, *The Tale of Genji*. There are three superb translations of this work: by A. Waley in 1952, E. G. Seidensticker in 1976, and R. Tyler in 2001. A side-by-side comparison is revealing.
- R. J. PEARSON et al., eds., *Windows on the Japanese Past: Studies in Archaeology and Prehistory* (1986).
- D. L. PHILIPPI, trans., *Kojiki* (1968). Japan's ancient myths. The best translation, despite maddeningly idiosyncratic romanizations of names.
- J. PIGGOT, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (1997).
- J. N. RABINOVITCH, trans., *Shōmonki: The Story of Masakado's Rebellion* (1986). The tale of Taira Masakado's rebellion against the Kyoto court in the tenth century.
- E. O. REISCHAUER, *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law and Ennin's Travels in T'ang China* (1955).
- E. O. REISCHAUER and A. M. Craig, *Japan: Tradition and Transformation* (1989). A detailed text covering the total sweep of Japanese history from the early beginnings through the 1980s.
- D. H. SHIVELY and W. H. McCullough, *The Cambridge History of Japan: Heian Japan* (1999). Many authors, many topics.

32 Chapter 1 • Japanese History: Origins to the Twelfth Century

Sources of the Japanese Tradition (second edition 2005) compiled by W.T. de Bary, C. Gluck, and A. E. Tiedemann, and *Sources of the Japanese Tradition* (first edition 1958), compiled by R. Tsunoda, W. T. de Bary, and D. Keene. The two best collections of original religious, political, and philosophical writings from each period of Japanese history. There is some overlap of content in the two editions, but not much, despite the similarity in titles.

H. TONOMURA, *Community and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan* (1992).

H. P. VARLEY, *Imperial Restoration in Medieval Japan* (1971).