

The Origins of Japan

Japanese Geography

Japan is an archipelago, which is a chain of islands. Much of Japan is composed of mountains. It is located on the Ring of Fire, a zone of earthquake and volcanic activity surrounding the Pacific Ocean. Only about 11% of the total land can be farmed, but the volcanic soil is very fertile. Because of their isolation from the mainland, the Japanese developed many unique qualities. They believed that they had a destiny separate from that of the peoples on the mainland, although cultural diffusion of language, religion, and architecture did occur from China via the Korea land bridge.

The economy of early Japan was based on farming. Because of the limited amount of farmland and the abundant rainfall, the Japanese people grew wet rice. Foreign trade began during the eleventh century. This trade was mainly with China and Korea. Japan traded raw materials, paintings, and swords and manufactured goods for silk, porcelain, books, and copper coins.

1. What were some geographic features of Japan?

The Rise of the Japanese State

The early Japanese settled on the largest Japanese Island, in the first century A.D. Japanese society was made up of clans. The people of Japan were divided between a small aristocratic class and a large class of rice farmers, artisans and servants. Eventually, one ruler of the Yamato clan became ruler of Japan.

During the early years of Yamato rule (250-710), the official state religion was Shinto, “the way of the gods.” Shinto honors the spirits thought to inhabit such natural features as trees, rocks, and mountains. The Yamato rulers claimed to be descendants of the sun goddess who ruled over nature spirits and protected Japan. The emperor controlled both religion and government.

In the early seventh century, the Yamato prince Shotoku Taishi tried to unify the clans to resist an invasion by the Chinese. He sent representatives to China to learn how its government was organized. Then he created a centralized system of government in Japan based on the Chinese model. Shotoku wanted to enhance his own authority. As a result, the ruler was portrayed as a divine figure and the symbol of the Japanese nation. A new tax system was set up to pay taxes directly to the central government and all farmland belonged to the state.

1. What is Shintoism?

2. What was Prince Shotoku’s plan?

The Nara Period

In 622, after Shotoku Taishi’s death, the Fujiwara family gained power. The new leaders enacted Shotoku’s reforms after his death. The most profound change of Japanese government was the adoption of Confucian models of government. The reforms undertaken by Shotoku addressed internal problems the Yamato court was faced with and dramatically changed Japanese history. These reforms were known as the Taika Reforms, set in 645. The first permanent capital was modeled after the Chinese capital and established in Nara in 710. The emperor began using the title, “Son of Heaven.”

The most influential cultural development in the Nara was the flowering of Buddhism. Several schools of Buddhist thought imported from Tang China made their way to the capital city. For the most part, Buddhism was a phenomenon of the capital city well into the Heian period. This gave Japanese monarchs a moral basis for their rule and a justification for adapting rules and laws to changing circumstances.

1. How did Prince Shotoku’s reforms change Japan?

2. What was the most important cultural development of the Nara?

The Heian Period

The Heian Period (794-1192) in Japanese history is marked by a time of peace and prosperity rivaled only by the Tokugawa Shogunate in later Japanese history. Japanese culture flourished like never before under the Heian, this period along with the Nara period is known as “Classical” Japan.

The emperor moved the capital from Nara to Heian, in 794. The emperor continued to rule in name, but actual power remained in the hands of the Fujiwara clan. The new Heian government solidified the reforms of the Nara dynasty. At the top of the hierarchy was the Tenno, or “Divine Emperor.” The emperor was both Shinto and Confucian; he ruled by virtue of the Mandate of Heaven and had legitimate claim of being a descendant of the Sun Goddess.

The government was becoming more decentralized. Powerful aristocrats were losing power. They began to take justice into their own hands, began to dominate rural areas. They hired warriors called samurai (“those who serve”) to protect their property and for security. Originally, the samurai were servants of the emperor but because the aristocracy paid them the samurai began to shift toward them. The samurai lived by a strict code, known as Bushido, the way of the warrior. This code was rooted in loyalty to the lord the samurai served.

The Heian government began to develop a culture all their own, independent of China. Even with Chinese influences, the Japanese began to develop their own system of writing. Secondly, they developed a court culture with values that were uniquely Japanese. The Japanese created such values such as “courtliness”, and “simplicity.” Literature also took hold, Lady Murasaki Shikibu wrote The Tales of the Genji, which is considered to be the greatest classic of Japanese literature. By this time Japan was going through a period of success and stability that had greatly impacted their society. It is considered one of the greatest times in Japanese history.

1. What are samurai? Why were they important?
2. What is Bushido?
3. What were some things the Heian government did the give Japan its own culture?

Influence of China and Korea

From the Koreans, the Japanese learned many Chinese ways. Their temple architecture, clothing styles, and methods of preparing food all began to show Chinese influence. More important, the Japanese learned the Chinese writing system and adapted it to their own language. Writing also led to the development of Japanese literature, philosophy, and written history. They also used a Chinese bureaucratic method of governing.

The Koreans introduced Buddhism and Confucianism to Japan. The Buddhist idea of gaining peace through discipline and methods of concentrating the mind appealed to the Japanese. The most popular form of Buddhism is Zen Buddhism. Zen beliefs became a part of the samurai’s code of behavior. In Zen Buddhism, there are different ways to achieve enlightenment. Some believe it can be achieved suddenly, while others believe that meditation and self-discipline is the path.

1. How did Korea and China influence Japan?
2. What is Zen Buddhism?

The Kamakura Shogunate

Minamoto Yoritomo became leader at the end of the twelfth century. He created a more centralized government under a powerful military leader known as the Shogun (general). The emperor remained the ruler in name only; power was in the hands of the shogun, which supervised a system of government known as a Shogunate. This ushered in a feudal system similar to Europe's during the Middle Ages. A class system based on protection for land lasted for nearly 500 years.

The Kamakura Shogunate, founded by Yoritomo, lasted from 1192 to 1333. In 1274, Kublai Khan sent a vast fleet to invade Japan but it was destroyed by a hurricane—the Japanese called this fortunate hurricane a kamikaze, or a "wind from the gods." Again in 1281, Kublai launched the largest amphibious assault in the history of the ancient and medieval worlds. They had the latest technology including gunpowder bombs and "fire-sticks," or guns, and their waves of archers dealt out death and destruction with astonishing efficiency. But they were unable to land. Finally, another hurricane struck, and the bulk of the Chinese army sank with the fleet. Fighting the Mongols placed a heavy strain on the government, which was overthrown by the Ashikaga family in 1333.

1. What is the shogun? What kind of power did he have?

2. What is a kamikaze?