

The Origins of Japan

Japanese Geography

Japan is an archipelago, which is a chain of islands. Japan is composed of mountains and 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, their main crop was 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 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.

In the early seventh century, the Yamato prince Shotoku tried to unify the clans to resist an invasion by the Chinese. He sent representatives to China to learn their government was organized. Then he created a centralized system of government in Japan based on China. Shotoku 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?

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 and dramatically changed Japanese history. These reforms were known as the Taika Reforms, set in 645. The first capital was 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 part 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. Japanese culture flourished like never before under the Heian, this period along with the Nara period is known as “Classical” Japan. The capital moved from Nara to Heian, in 794. The emperor continued to rule in name, but actual power remained in the hands of the Fujiwara clan. 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 and began to dominate rural areas. They hired warriors called samurai to protect their property and for security. Originally, the samurai were servants of the emperor but because the aristocracy paid them they switched sides. The samurai lived by a strict code, known as Bushido, the way of the warrior. This 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?

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 Japanese Constitution (604 CE)

1. Harmony is to be valued, and an avoidance of opposition to be honored. All men are influenced by class-feelings, and there are few who are intelligent. But when those above are harmonious and those below are friendly, and there is concord in the discussion of business, right views of things spontaneously gain acceptance.

2. Sincerely reverence the three treasures. The three treasures: the Buddha, the Law, and the Priesthood, they are the final refuge . . . and are the supreme objects of faith in all countries. What man in what age can fail to reverence this law? Few men are utterly bad. They may be taught to follow it. But if they do not go to the three treasures, how shall their crookedness be made straight?

3. When you receive the Imperial commands, fail not scrupulously to obey them. The lord is Heaven, the vassal is Earth. Heaven overspreads and Earth upbears. When this is so, the four seasons follow their due course, and the powers of Nature obtain their efficacy. If the Earth attempted to overspread, Heaven would simply fall in ruin. Therefore is it that when the lord speaks, the vassal listens; when the superior acts, the inferior yields compliance. Consequently when you receive the Imperial commands, fail not to carry them out scrupulously. Let there be a want of care in this matter, and ruin is the natural consequence.

7. Let every man have his own charge, and let not the spheres of duty be confused. When wise men are entrusted with office, the sound of praise arises. If unprincipled men hold office, disasters and tumults are multiplied. In this world, few are born with knowledge: wisdom is the product of earnest meditation. In all things, whether great or small, find the right man, and they will surely be well managed:

11. Give clear appreciation to merit and demerit, and deal out to each its sure reward or punishment. In these days, reward does not attend upon merit, nor punishment upon crime. You highly intelligent men, who have charge of public affairs, let it be your task to make clear rewards and punishments. . . .

17. Decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. May miscarry, that one should arrange they should be discussed with many. But small matters are of less consequence. It is unnecessary to consult a number of people. It is only in the case of the discussion of weighty affairs, when there is a suspicion that they may miscarry, that one should arrange matters in concert with others, so as to arrive at the right conclusion.

Source: W.G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, 2 vols. in 1 (London: Keagan and Co., 1896), vol. 2, pp. 128-133.

1. Based on this document, what two religions is this constitution based on? Use evidence to support your claim.
2. What types of men are revered in this society? Use evidence to support your claim.