

ANCIENT JAPAN

Japan does not appear in history until 57 AD when it is first mentioned in Chinese histories, where it is referred to as "Wa." The Chinese historians tell us of a land divided into a hundred or so separate tribal communities without writing or political cohesion. The Japanese do not start writing their histories until around 600 AD; this historical writing culminates in 700 AD in the massive chronicles, *The Record of Ancient Matters* and the *Chronicles of Japan*. These chronicles tell a much different and much more legendary history of Japan, deriving the people of Japan from the gods themselves.

The Japanese are late-comers in Asian history. Preceding their unification and their concern with their own history in the latter half of the first millennium AD is a long period of migration and settlement. Where did the Japanese come from? Why did they settle the islands? What did life look like before history was written down?

In order to get a handle on ancient Japanese history, it helps to consider that it is driven by outside influences. The first involved the settlement of Japan by a group of peoples from the Korean peninsula in the third century BC. Overnight they transformed the stone-age culture of Japan into an agricultural and metal-working culture. These early immigrants are ultimately the origin of Japanese language and culture.

The second great push in Japanese history was contact with China from 200 AD onwards. From the Chinese, who demanded that Japan be a tribute state to China, the Japanese adopted forms of government, Buddhism, and writing. While Japanese culture ultimately derives from the immigrants of the third century BC, the bulk of Japanese culture is forged from Chinese materials—a fact that will drive an entire cultural revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as scholars attempt to reclaim original Japanese culture from its Chinese accretions.

The overwhelming fact that suffuses every aspect of Japanese culture is its geography. Japan is a series of islands—the group consists of over 3000 islands of which 600 are inhabited. The four main islands, Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Hokkaido dominate Japanese history, however. The largest island is Honshu, but the overall geographical area of the inhabited islands is less than California. The climate is pleasantly moderate, for the islands lie in the path of the Black Current which flows north from the tropics. All the islands are mountainous and subject to a variety of natural disasters, especially earthquakes and tsunamis. The mountainous terrain leaves its mark on Japanese culture; since the mountains provide natural and difficult barriers, political life in Japan centered around regional rather than national governments. The earliest flowering of Japanese history took place in the low-lying plains on the island of Honshu, especially the Yamato plain in the south—a region that gave its name to the first "official" name for Japan, **Yamato**. There the very first Japanese kingdom arose and provided the basis of future Japanese civilizations.

Japan as a series of islands has always been isolated from the mainland from about 10,000 B.C. to the present day. For this reason, the original inhabitants managed to hold

on to stone-age life long after the regions to the west had urbanized. This island status has also protected Japan from foreign invasions. Only twice in Japanese history has the island been successfully overrun by foreigners: in the third century BC by the wave of immigrations from the Korean peninsula, and in 1945 by the United States.

The areas of Japan which have shown the most cultural change are those, as you might imagine, that are closest to the mainland of Asia. The southern island of Kyushu and the southwestern peninsula of Honshu lie close to the Korean peninsula. It is in this region that the Japanese first immigrated into Japan in the third century BC, and it is in this region that the first state in Japan was established: the Yamato State on the Yamato peninsula (the southwesternmost peninsula on Honshu).

Despite the late arrival of Japan into written history, the beginnings go back ten thousand years to a mysterious people which would eventually produce a unique and vital culture, the Jomon.

Richard Hooker

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The Yamato State

The Yamato peninsula, on the southwestern most portion of the island of Honshu, has historically been the region through which cultural influence from the mainland has passed into Japan. Beginning in 300 A.D., a new culture distinguished itself from Yayoi culture in the area around Nara and Osaka in the south of Honshu. This culture built giant tomb mounds, called *kofun*, many of which still exist; these tomb mounds were patterned after a similar practice in Korea. It is from these tomb mounds that these people derive their name: the **Kofun**. For two hundred years, these tombs were filled with objects that normally filled Yayoi tombs, such as mirrors and jewels. But beginning in 500 A.D., these tombs were filled with armor and weapons. So we know that around this time, a new wave of cultural influence had passed over from Korea into Japan.

The earliest Japanese state we know of was ruled over by Yamato "great kings"; the Yamato state, which the Japanese chronicles date to 500 A.D., that is, the time when a new wave of Korean cultural influence passed through southern Japan, was really a loose hegemony. Yamato is the plain around Osaka; it is the richest agricultural region in Japan. The Yamato kings located their capital at Naniwa (modern day Osaka) and enjoyed a hegemony over the surrounding aristocracies that made them powerful and wealthy. They built for themselves magnificent tomb-mounds; like all monumental architecture, these tombs represented the wealth and power of the Yamato king. The

keyhole-shaped tomb-mound of Nintoku is longer than five football fields and has twice the volume of the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

According to the Japanese chronicles, the court of the Yamato kings was based on Korean models for the titles given to the court and regional aristocrats were drawn from Korean titles. As in Yayoi Japan, the basic social unit was the *uji* ; what had been added was an aristocracy based on military readiness. This military aristocracy would remain the single most powerful group in Japanese history until the Meiji restoration in 1868. The various aristocratic families did not live peacefully together; the Yamato court witnessed constant struggles among the aristocratic families for power.

During this period, Japan had a presence on the Korean peninsula itself. Korea was in its most dynamic cultural and political period; the peninsula itself was divided into three great kingdoms: Koguryo in the north, Paekche in the east, and Silla in the west. Paekche understood the strategic importance of Japan and so entered into alliance with the Yamato state. This connection between the Yamato court and Paekche is culturally one of the most important events of early Japanese history. For the Paekche court sent to Japan Korean craftspeople: potters, metal workers, artists, and so on. But they also imported Chinese culture. In the fifth or sixth century, the Koreans imported Chinese writing in order to record Japanese names. In 513, the Paekche court sent a Confucian scholar to the Yamato court. In 552, the Paekche sent an image of Buddha, some Buddhist scriptures, and a Buddhist representative. These three imports—writing, Confucianism, and Buddhism—would transform Japanese culture as profoundly as the Yayoi immigrations had done.

The most important period in early Japan occurs during the reign of Empress Suiko, who ruled from 592 to 628 A.D.. In the latter years of the 500's, the alliance between Paekche and the Yamato state broke down; this eventually led to the loss of Japanese holdings on the Korean peninsula. Waves of Koreans migrated to Japan, and, to make matters worse, the powerful military aristocracies of the Yamato state began to resist the Yamato hegemony.

The Yamato court responded to these problems by adopting a Chinese-style government. In the early years of the seventh century, they sent envoys to China in order to study Chinese government, society, and philosophy. At home, they reorganized the court along the Chinese model, sponsored Buddhism, and adopted the Chinese calendar. All of these changes were administered by **Prince Shotoku** (in Japanese, **Shotoku Taishi**, 573-621) who was the regent of the Yamato court during the reign of Empress Suiko. His most important contribution, however, was the writing and adoption of a Chinese-style constitution in 604 A.D.. The **Seventeen Article Constitution** (in Japanese, **Kenpo Jushichijo**) was the earliest piece of Japanese writing and formed the overall philosophic basis of Japanese government through much of Japanese history. This constitution is firmly based on Confucian principles (although it has a number of Buddhist elements). It states the Confucian belief that the universe is composed of three realms, Heaven, Man, and Earth, and that the Emperor is placed in authority by the will of Heaven in order to guarantee the welfare of his subjects. The "great king" of earlier Japanese history would

be replaced by the **Tenno**, or "Heavenly Emperor." The *Seventeen Article Constitution* stressed the Confucian virtues of harmony, regularity, and the importance of the moral development of government officials.

Shotoku, however, was also a devout Buddhist. The second article of the constitution specifically enjoins the ruler to value the Three Treasures of Buddhism. The overall Constitution, however, is overwhelmingly Confucian.

The constitution was followed by a coup against the ruling Soga clan, from which Shotoku was derived. The new emperor, Kotoku Tenno (645-655), began an energetic reform movement that culminated in the **Taika Reform Edicts** in 645 A.D.. These edicts were written and sponsored by Confucian scholars in the Yamato court and essentially founded the Japanese imperial system. The ruler was no longer a clan leader, but **Emperor** that ruled by the Decree of Heaven and exercised absolute authority. Japan would no longer be a set of separate states, but provinces of the Emperor to be ruled by a centralized bureaucracy. The Reform Edicts demanded that all government officials undergo stringent reform and demonstrate some level of moral and bureaucratic competency. Japan, however, was still largely a Neolithic culture; it would take centuries for the ideal of the Chinese style emperor to take root.

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