

ANCIENT JAPANESE CULTURE

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Geography

Japan's status as an archipelago relatively accessible to the Asian mainland has surely conditioned its emergence as a civilization. There are four main islands—Kyûshû, Honshû, Shikoku, and the northern island of Hokkaidô. The terrain is generally rugged and mountainous, with ample rainfall and lush vegetation. Bamboo groves are a ubiquitous—and beautiful—feature of the landscape. The expanses of habitable land, generally along the Pacific Coast and in the vicinity of the inland sea, would become the cradle of civilization and, in modern times, the site of dense, interconnected urban agglomerations.

The Japanese archipelago sits atop one of the earth's most active tectonic zones; earthquakes are common and occasionally catastrophic. The northern lands, especially those facing the Sea of Japan, are cold and snowy. The southern island of Kyûshû is subtropical. Further south, the Okinawan island chain, which was historically an independent kingdom, only recently came under Japanese national sovereignty. Today, most Japanese (there are around 125 million) live in the urban 'megalopolis' along the Pacific coast; it comprises a small proportion of a land mass roughly the size of California.

Early Stages and Mainland Influence

Japan's aboriginal people, the Ainu, are Caucasians who migrated across glacial ice many millennia ago. They were gradually absorbed by subsequent waves of Asiatic migration from the mainland and the southern island chain. Although exact dating is unclear, an early epoch originated around 10,000 years ago. This is the so-called Jômon period, named on account of the distinctive rope-imprinted pottery artifacts of its nomadic peoples. What brought this millennia-old period to a close was the gradual absorption of influences from the mainland. In particular, the introduction of paddy-field rice cultivation led to the spread of agrarian villages and more stable, cooperative societal arrangements. The cumulative impact of Chinese influence, both material and intangible, beginning around 300 BCE gave rise to a more sophisticated stage of civilization, referred to as Yayoi, whose artifacts reflect greater technical sophistication and a more refined aesthetic sense. However crucial to Japan's emergence as a civilization, the assimilation of foreign influences occurred in the context of well-established native practices and beliefs. The native and the foreign would achieve a remarkable degree of complementarity, and this capacity to hybridize and 'domesticate' outside influences would henceforth come to define Japan's emerging civilization.

Shinto

Japan's native belief system, Shinto is an animistic faith predicated upon the existence and efficacy of *kami* deities, the sacredness of the land, and strict requirements regarding ritual purity and ceremonial lustration. The divine *kami*— which included 'awesome' natural phenomena such as ancient trees and great mountains (Mount Fuji, for example)— were widely worshipped and honored in communal ceremonies known as *matsuri*. And according to the Japanese creation myth, the *kami* generated a lineage of divine humans, who would comprise a succession of Emperor/ *kami* traceable to the mythical Emperor Jimmu. The most sacred site in Shinto is the Grand Shrine at Ise, dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and allegedly housing the Sacred Mirror, one of three imperial regalia mentioned in the mythical record. Rebuilt since time immemorial every twenty years, in order to maintain its purity and pristine beauty, the Ise Shrine has long served as a cultural mecca and a wellspring of national identity, to the present day.

In short, a strong connection with nature, the natural cycle, and native place has long marked Japanese society and culture. The contact with mainland civilization— both material and intangible— served to advance the

sophistication of Japan's own civilization and, thanks to Shinto, helped deepen a sense of connection to the native land, the local community, and the world of ancestors and deities.

Rise of the Yamato State

A key development of around 300 CE was the spread of new weaponry and martial techniques among dominant clans (*uji*) in what would lead to the consolidation of power and the extension of control over the region near modern-day Nara—the so-called Yamato state. This process eventually yielded an emperor-centered aristocratic class that would rule the land and, in one form or another, would survive well into the 20th century. The Yamato roots of Japanese civilization—and its national identity—have been both celebrated and contested. But the appearance in the 5th century of a new, more powerful clan is evident, given the massive tombs (*kofun*) that were built in the area of modern-day Osaka. The so-called 'kofun period' is thus an immediate precursor to Japan's emergence as a historical civilization in the 6th century. In sum, the civilization of Japan constitutes an amalgam of deep native roots and transformational borrowings from its East-Asian neighbors, China and Korea.

Readings

Hudson, Mark. *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands* (Hawaii, 1999)

Imamura, Keiji, *Prehistoric Japan: New Perspectives on Insular East Asia* (Hawaii, 1996)

Varley, Paul, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii, 2000), 1-18

Discussion Questions and Topics

How are we to assess the contribution that 'prehistory' makes to the formation of a historical civilization? Give thought to the proposition that the notion of 'roots' and 'native traditions' is highly subjective, reflecting cultural memory and national identity in the modern era. How might you conceive of—and express—your own origins?

How would you argue for the influence of geography and topography as civilizational 'drivers'? Is the fact of Japan's insular circumstance an inevitable contributing factor? How might you substantiate such a claim?

What do archaeological artifacts say about the societal qualities of prehistoric peoples? How have Japanese artifacts been used to construct a portrait of its pre-historical communities? Give thought to the ways in which museums and exhibitions display and interpret their collected 'things,' as a means of bringing ancient civilizations to life. What might be counterproductive about such a strategy?

Images



Map of Japan and environs (<http://www.globalsherpa.org>)



Jōmon pottery vessel, 3000-2000 B.C. (Wikipedia)



Yayoi vessel, 1st-3rd century C.E. (Wikipedia)



Ise— Inner Shrine (Wikipedia)