

## JAPANESE HISTORY – Post Classical Age (500 CE-1600 CE)

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### Part 1: Early Postclassical Period

### Part 2: Late Postclassical Period

## PART 1: EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview.

Japan had been transformed in a relatively short period of time during the Yayoi period (300BCE-300CE). The introduction of wet rice agriculture, bronze and iron technology and significant human migration—all most likely coming from the Korean Peninsula—created an environment in which society and culture could emerge. Settlements were no longer sparse and widely dispersed and were becoming larger and more sophisticated. Social structures, local government and indigenous religion had developed. Though there were no cities, large villages appear in the archeological record and large clans dominated. Northern Kyūshū and the Yamato Plain (near the city of Nara today) in particular are known regional centers late in the Yayoi period within which food stuffs, cast and forged objects such as farm implements, weapons, religious objects and the like were traded. As Japan entered the early post-classical age, the first central government appeared where powerful monarchs ruled approximately half of what is today contemporary Japan. During this period, the Japanese also adopted Chinese writing, which means that some real people, history and events are known to posterity. In short, Japan came of age during this period. The golden age of early Japanese history had arrived.

### Events

**Horse-Riding Culture.** Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, there was another wave of migration from the mainland. These immigrants brought with them new technology and a new set of organizational skills—both of which were very useful in military applications. For example, there is archaeological evidence of a horse-riding culture that came from Korea, of warriors wearing armor and of the ability of some leaders to harness the labor of large groups of people for the building of the very large tombs which distinguished the era. Historians agree that sometime between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is possible to speak of an emerging “Japanese culture.”

**The Yamato Clan.** During this time several clans began to vie for dominance. One in particular, the Yamato, emerged as “first among equals” at some point in the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century and proclaimed themselves the Imperial family. This process did not go unnoticed by the other clan chieftains and a series of struggles ensued. The Yamato were very capable leaders and not above using bribery, force and diplomacy to maneuver themselves into power. For example, the Yamato clan, who ruled an area around what is today the city of Nara, was allied with the Korean kingdom of Paekche. This allowed for the importation from the continent of iron weapons, weavers, scribes, metal workers and other artisans before their rivals.

**Prince Shōtoku.** One of the most prominent leaders of early Yamato Japan was an aristocrat known as Prince Shōtoku (574-622). Prince Shōtoku never became emperor even though he was the son of Emperor Yōmei (518-587) and was one of the Yamato leaders who helped defeat the rival Mononobe clan at the Battle of Shigisan in 587. The *Nihongi*, an 8<sup>th</sup> century document which chronicles the early years of Yamato Japan, indicates that Prince Shōtoku convinced the Emperor to import many Chinese institutions. Some scholars believe that he even made a journey to the mainland, a dangerous proposition in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Prince Shōtoku is credited with bringing to Japan the Chinese calendar, Chinese ideas on statehood and legal system, art and, though some scholars dispute this, Buddhism.

**The Capital City of Nara.** In 710, the Imperial family decided to build a permanent capital called Nara, which gives name to the Nara Period (710-794). Prior to 710, reigning emperors would build a new seat of government, administer the realm during his (or her) reign and then upon the death of the emperor and the coronation of a new emperor, a new seat of government would be built. It is not entirely clear how this practice got started, however, most historians believe that Buddhist notions on the ritual defilement of space associated with death and bodily

decomposition led most rulers to seek out a new space. Because of this, Japanese rulers prior to 710 rarely built grand, imposing cities or structures.

**The Dōkyō Incident.** Having close ties with religious organizations can be a tricky thing, however. Within a decade of the Emperor Shōmu's death (701-756), trouble began to brew with his successor, the Empress Kōken (718-770). The chronicles tell of a special relationship that sprang up in 764 between the Empress and a Buddhist monk named Dōkyō (700-772). Though it is unclear whether there was any romantic attachment, Dōkyō very, very quickly rose through the ranks, began to put on royal airs and appeared to be making a play for the throne itself. This threat to the prerogatives of the Imperial household became intolerable, but no action was taken because Kōken's premature death in 770 rendered this unnecessary. Still—the threat posed by the Buddhist institutions had become all too clear to the court. In the aftermath of the Dōkyō Incident, the Imperial family and their handlers decided that, among other reasons, factional machinations among the Buddhist organizations in Nara would never again threaten the prerogatives of the throne. In an effort to ensure that it never happened again, the Emperor Kanmu (737-806) decided to construct a new capital. After a few years of searching and consultation, a new site was selected—Nagaoka. Construction began in the year 784 and within a few months, an Imperial Palace and a few other official buildings were sufficiently complete to begin to move the seat of government. But, in one of the great mysteries of Japanese history, the entire city was abandoned in 794 and the search for a new one began.

**The New Capital City of Heian.** The site for another new capital city was situated near both Nara and Nagaoka. From a military perspective, it was very well chosen. It was ringed on three sides by mountains, had ample fresh water supplies and was near enough to the sea for easy access. The city would be named Heiankyō. Though it would change names from Heiankyō, to Heian to Kyōto, it would remain the capital city from 794 to 1868.

**The Fujiwara Period.** One of the defining characteristics of the Heian period (794-1185) is the prominence of one aristocratic family—the Fujiwara. Prior to becoming the most important court family, the Fujiwara had served the Imperial family in various capacities since at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Later, a member of the Fujiwara family held the position of regent (*sesshō*) to an underage (usually) boy emperor. Still later, a Fujiwara would be named regent to an adult emperor (*kampaku*). The Fujiwara were able to maintain their grip on power for more than two hundred years. Indeed—most of the positions they held at court became hereditary. The early Fujiwara nobles were masterful politicians. One in particular, Yoshifusa (804-872), who became regent to the Emperor Montoku (826-858), is reported to have married his daughter Akirakeiko off to the Emperor Montoku—something which was not at all unexpected given his position as grand minister of state. That meant that his grandson would become the next emperor—and Yoshifusa would become his regent (*sesshō*) as well. This is made all the more important because, in Japan, the offspring of nobility were often raised in their mother's family for several years. Yoshifusa's position as head of household and regent allowed him to raise the boy emperor as a Fujiwara and manipulate imperial institutions to his advantage. Thereafter, it became practice for a Fujiwara to marry off a daughter (or niece) to a crown prince or reigning emperor (who was also usually a Fujiwara!). In this way, enormous wealth, privilege and power accumulated to this family.

**Fujiwara no Michinaga.** The most famous of all Fujiwara was Michinaga (966-1027). Michinaga was a man of great passions, a lover of strong drink and of beautiful women. He was perhaps the most masterful politician of the Heian period. He was, without question the most powerful, wealthiest man in the land. He was a contemporary of the novelist Murasaki Shikibu, author of the world's first novel—*Tale of Genji*. Several of the stories in Murasaki's work are reportedly about him. Michinaga had an amazing legacy. He married 4 daughters to emperors, was uncle to 2 emperors and was grandfather to another 3 emperors.

**Grand Estates.** The world of the shining prince (Michinaga's Japan), though brilliant, was destined to be short lived. Even in the midst of the golden era, structural problems were beginning to become evident. In particular, there was an increasing shortfall in tax revenue. In part, this was because taxes were raised to pay for the profligate lifestyle of the court and aristocrats and in part because of conditions outside anyone's control such as poor harvests, natural disasters and the like. However, peasants and low-ranking members of society could (and often did) give their land to aristocrats who had tax exemptions. Those peasants were then able to stay on the land and pay a smaller portion of their income to the aristocrat in rent. Grand estates (*shōen*) became very large indeed. This led to a spiraling problem of tax avoidance, higher taxes to make up the shortfall and additional attempts at tax avoidance. The old Heian system (the *ritsuryō* system), though many years away from collapse, seemed to be on the wane and imperial power began to decline.

**The Period of the Retired Emperors.** The Fujiwara domination of Heian Japan, based as it was on biology and politics, was not very strong. All it took was one Fujiwara consort not being able to produce an heir and/or the unwillingness of an emperor or crown prince to marry another Fujiwara and the system ended. This happened during the time of the Emperor Shirakawa (1053-1129). As a relatively young man, Shirakawa set about doing the sorts of things the Fujiwara had done—collect grand estates and the money that came along with them—and get involved in marriage politics. In 1086, Shirakawa abdicated, but he would become the power behind the scenes for the next 43 years. This set off a series of struggles between the Fujiwara and a series of retired emperors which would mark the beginning of the end of the era.

**The Military.** The Imperial court had to rely upon “enforcers” to maintain law and order in the provinces and to ensure the efficient administration of the realm. In an era before the existence of a police force or constabulary, this task was often left to military families. The two most prominent of these were the Minamoto (Seiwa Genji) and the Taira (Heike). The Minamoto were descendants of the Emperor Seiwa (850-881), whose grandson—Tsunemoto (894-961) was given a military position by the Fujiwara. Over the course of time, the Minamoto came to have a very strong fighting force on land. The Taira were descendants of the Emperor Kanmu (737-806). Their strength was the navy.

**The Hōgen and Heiji Insurrections.** Two rebellions characterized the struggles between various member of the Fujiwara family and the retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192). The first of these small clashes took place in the city of Heian in the year 1156 and is called the Hōgen Rebellion. This was a small insurrection with only a few hundred warriors on all sides participating. What started as a struggle to determine Imperial succession between the Fujiwara regent Yorinaga (1120-1156) and Go-Shirakawa ended with a victory by the Taira and the execution of the Minamoto chieftain—Tameyoshi (1096-1156). Go-Shirakawa’s power, influence and authority, though damaged by the affair, was not greatly diminished. Tameyoshi’s son was ordered by the Taira chieftain, Kiyomori (1118-1181), to demonstrate his loyalty by cutting off his father’s head—a task he resisted doing for understandable reasons. This set off a blood feud between the two military families which would last for decades. In the Heiji Rebellion a few years later in 1159, many hundreds of warriors were involved. Prior to this time, warfare could be characterized as a “gentleman’s conflict.” The intensity and bloodshed of the Heiji Rebellion was somewhat unexpected. The participants in this action were much the same—Taira and allies vs. Minamoto and allies—but there were more of them on all sides. Taira Kiyomori, fighting on the side of Emperor Nijō (1143-1165), was prepared to fight using whatever tactics provided the best chance of success—even if it meant the death of civilians, the use of arson as a weapon—even threatening the safety of the Imperial court. The Minamoto, nominally allied with Go-Shirakawa, were unwilling to use savage, overwhelming force to win the day. This was a fatal blunder. Many of the Minamoto clan were executed and had their heads displayed on pikes in the public squares of Heian. War in the Heian period was becoming more serious.

**Minamoto Yoritomo.** After the Heiji Rebellion, Kiyomori was the undisputed military leader in the land. He was initially perceived to be the savior of the emperor himself. He was so powerful that many historians consider him to be something like an early shōgun—although that was a title to which he neither aspired nor held. Rather, Kiyomori wanted to be a courtier, and began to accumulate titles, land, and even began to engage in marriage politics. Indeed, he had one of his daughters married off to the Emperor Takakura (1161-1181). This meant that his grandson, Antoku (1178-1185), would be a Taira emperor! The chronicles describe Kiyomori as *nouveau rich* and not yet accepted as an equal by members of the late Heian aristocracy. Nonetheless, he was the undisputed power in the land and even became Chancellor of the realm—a title reserved at that time for the highest members of aristocracy. As the political landscape was reset in the decades after the Heiji Insurrection, it eventually became clear that Kiyomori intended to rule if not reign. However, for those with political grievances against Kiyomori, there was no one they could petition who could check his power.

**The Hōjō.** In the aftermath of the Heiji Insurrection, Kiyomori had, uncharacteristically, shown mercy to the youngest sons and heirs to the headship of the Minamoto clan. These two boys—one most likely in his early teens (Yoritomo) and the other an infant (Yoshitsune)—were sent to live in exile in the small city of Kamakura near the present city of Tokyo. The boys were cared for by a branch family of the Taira, the Hōjō, and made a ward of Hōjō Tokimasa (1138-1215), the clan leader. The boys grew up in Kamakura and developed a fondness for their guardians/captors.

**The Gempei War.** In 1179, Kiyomori was 61 years old and, sensing his mortality, moved to consolidate his official power, eliminate his rivals and protect the (new) prerogatives of his descendants. His grandson, the future Emperor Antoku, was made crown prince. Kiyomori believed his enemies were conspiring against him—a charge which was all too true. A plot was “discovered” and the retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa was arrested. Other government figures were removed from power and banished. This *coup d’etat* by Kiyomori was finally more than the elites of Japan could tolerate. There was a sense in the land that a final showdown was imminent.

In 1180, Yoritomo (1147-1199), then approximately 33 years old, received a letter in Kamakura from Go-Shirakawa in which he was asked to chastise the traitor Kiyomori. Yoritomo, with revenge on his mind for the dishonorable deaths of his father and grandfather, took up the cause. This would later become known as the Gempei War (1180-1185). In 1181, the despised Kiyomori died leaving the Taira without leadership. A series of battles ensued, some small and some large, which ended in the annihilation of the Taira. Much to the consternation of Go-Shirakawa, Yoritomo had no intention of returning to Heian to await Imperial orders. He was named shōgun in 1192, a title which had long existed but which was without political power before this time. Yoritomo then set about creating a shōgunate mostly independent of the throne.

## **Government**

**Land-Holding.** In the early years of Yamato dominance, the extent of Imperial control over the country is not clear. It is believed that they started out ruling in coalition with other clans and slowly overwhelmed their rivals as conditions allowed. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, most of Japan from the Kansai area (around present day Osaka) west and south is believed to have been subject to the throne. Western Honshū and most of Kyūshū, though not densely populated by today’s standards, was generally settled. Over time, ethnic Japanese colonists continued to migrate northward and by at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Imperial family claimed all of Honshū. It is clear, however, that the area north of present-day Sendai was very sparsely populated and central control was tenuous. Indeed, the title of shogun first appeared when Japanese military units were sent to subjugate the north. Their commander’s title was *Sei-i Tai shōgun* (supreme commander for the subjugation of the northern barbarians). Nonetheless, as the Japanese emperors extended geographic control, they also continued to expand political control.

**Taxation.** Rather than reinventing the wheel, the Japanese monarchs looked to the Tang Empire in China (618-907) for a deliberate system of landholding and its most important accompanying element, a rational basis for taxation. These were implemented in Japan and became known as the Taika reforms. In this system, peasants were initially allotted 2 tan (about ½ of an acre) per male over the age of 5 years old and 2/3rds of that amount for females over the age of 5 to farm. Given that in theory the emperor had provided land for the peasants, failure to pay taxes could result in expulsion from the land and quickly to starvation. Initially, the tax—which was based on crop production—was not too onerous and amounted to only 5%. That number later increased significantly. In addition to raising revenue for the Imperial treasury, this also removed the land from the control of local elites because the Emperor had to rely upon a bureaucracy to administer the system.

**Statehood.** In the Nara period and the early years of the Heian period, the Emperor ruled as well as reigned. He named a set of advisors and ministers, most of whom were courtiers, to administer a discrete portfolio. The emperor ruled the provinces through governors, whose job it was to keep the peace, implement imperial decrees and laws—and most importantly see that taxes were deposited into the treasury. The chronicles tell us that many of these governors increasingly became less willing to leave the city, the only civilization in the country and began to spend more time in the capital rather than doing their jobs in the rural areas. During the last years of the Nara era, they would appoint deputies to do their jobs, levy extraordinarily high taxes and sometimes behave in a coercive and intimidating manner. In the final years of Kanmu’s reign, he cracked down on the worst abuses by creating “circuit inspectors,” whose job it was check on court appointees. Slowly, power became more and more centralized in the office of the emperor during the early years of the Heian period.

By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Fujiwara family had effectively seized control of the monarchy and whoever was head of the Fujiwara household effectively ruled Japan, a system that lasted for approximately 200 years. The Fujiwara leader married a daughter (or niece) to an emperor or crown prince, which resulted in the next generation being a Fujiwara emperor. Most often, a Fujiwara boy who had not yet reached the age of majority was placed on the throne and required a regent, which then became the Fujiwara head of household. This arrangement lasted long enough that the positions they occupied became hereditary and the Fujiwara came to be known as the premier court nobles.

**The Military.** In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emperor established a military. Each province was to provide a certain number of soldiers for a standing army. The soldiers were to drill and be ready in case of emergency. After the period of unification was complete, however, there was little need for a large military, even one of dubious quality, because there were no known external threats after Tang China went into decline. The standing army therefore transitioned to a much smaller, more professional force positioned mostly in the rural areas and commanded by either a member of the Taira or Minamoto clan. In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Japanese military came to be used as a tool for the suppression of the political enemies of the Fujiwara or a retired emperor.

## Culture

**Shintō.** The indigenous religion of Japan is called Shintō. Shintō means the “way of the gods” and is polytheistic. Rather than worshipping one single, all powerful God, as is the case in the religions from the Abrahamic traditions, adherents of Shintō venerate and worship many different gods (*kami*) which are reflected in the natural world. Natural wonders, old trees, waterfalls and the like are examples of objects to be venerated. Shintō has no sacred texts, no code of conduct, little concept of the afterlife and a poorly defined liturgy. Shintō provided a cosmology for Japan and introduced the sun goddess Amaterasu, the founding deity of Japan. It would be difficult to convert to Shintō if one were not Japanese. Shintō is often described as being a way of life for the Japanese, but it is not necessarily a philosophy. One can worship at a Shintō shrine or where ever objects in nature are found. Shintō is not exclusive. In fact, many Japanese are adherents of both Shintō and Buddhism.

**Buddhism.** Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (probably earlier—but documentary and archaeological evidence for this is lacking) and remains a vibrant part of the religious landscape of Japan today. There are many, many different sects of Buddhism in Japan, some of which have largely disappeared in places such as China and India—where Buddhism originated. The emerging Yamato rulers of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries eagerly embraced Buddhism as a way to legitimize their own rule and provided funding for the building of temples and monasteries. The earliest temple complex constructed, of the Tōdaiji sect, can be found in the ancient capital city of Nara. It was the Emperor Shōmu (701-756) who is credited with the casting of the gigantic, 49ft tall statue of the Daibutsu (great Buddha) which now rests in the great hall in Nara. During this period, Buddhism was privileged in Japan, generously funded and protected by the Emperor. Temples were built all over Japan and Buddhism became institutionally linked to the throne. The Emperor Kanmu (737-806) also understood the importance of Buddhism in Japan and decided that the new capital city of Heian should have religious institutions of its own. He decided to become a patron of two new sects of Buddhism—Tendai and Shingon. Both of these organizations were later urged to ordain their own clergy (which further diminished the power of the Tōdaiji sect in Nara) and build complexes on the mountains near the city. Both of these sects are still prominent in Japan today. Buddhism is as important in the history of Japan as the Roman Catholic Church is to the history of Europe.

## **Language and Literature.**

***Kanbun*: The Literary Form of Chinese.** The Chinese language was the single greatest influence on the development of Japanese language and literature. Before the time that Japanese civilization was beginning to coalesce in the 5th and 6th centuries, Japan had a spoken language, but no written language. As Japan's ruling elites learned more and more about the brilliance of China through their envoys abroad, they determined to adopt the written form of the Chinese language as a tool to help govern the Japanese people. After all, the Chinese language represented both a way to communicate in writing—something any government requires—and the glory of the Tang Dynasties—the world's greatest civilization at the time. The Japanese would later call this language *kanbun*—Chinese writing.

*Kanbun* became the language of officialdom and of the imperial household during the Nara period (710-784). It was one of the means through which the ancient government sought to legitimize its rule and assert its authority. By bringing writing to a people who had none, *kanbun* also represented civilization. In time, it came to occupy much the same position in Japan as Latin did in Europe. Later, Chinese characters were also modified to serve as Japanese writing (syllabary). Initially, the Japanese imperial court employed immigrant scribes to act as chroniclers and to help conduct the business of state. Naturally, the need arose over time to train more people to read and write the language. However, the rigors of learning such a difficult foreign language led to the development of many variant forms. Often, sentence structure was modified to reflect a writing style that more closely approximated Japanese grammar. Even at this early stage of language development, the various shades of *kanbun* had begun to blur. Nonetheless, knowledge of the language offered access to power. Many strove to master

it. Those who did so were revered as learned, erudite men. By the next historical period, the Heian era (794-1185), *kanbun* had become the language of the elite, the cultured and the refined. Some of the earliest examples of Japanese writing in *kanbun* can be seen in works produced in the seventh century. One of the most prominent is the *Kenpo Jūshichijō*, known in English as the “Constitution of Seventeen Articles.” Many scholars believe that the Regent Shōtoku Taishi (572-622), revered as one of the most able statesmen in all of Japanese history, wrote or supervised the writing of this document. He was impressed with all things Chinese and probably visited that country on at least one occasion. This document is one of the first works outlining the form and function of the state. Most official documents of the Nara and early Heian periods were written in *kanbun*. Among the famous works of literature written in *kanbun* were the *Kojiki*, *Nihongi* and the *Man'yōshū*. These works represent a significant portion of the extant narratives and poems from the earliest periods of Japanese culture. It should be noted, however, that these works were written in a slightly variant form of *kanbun*. Proper nouns posed the most immediate challenge because no Chinese characters existed to represent place names in Japan or the names of people. Even in its earliest forms, *kanbun* had to be adopted to suit the needs of the Japanese. Japanese literature in pre-history and antiquity therefore reflects both Japanese and Chinese sensibilities.

**Fiction.** *The Tale of Genji*, arguably the world’s first novel, was written in a form of language linguists call *wabun*. *Wabun*, as the name suggests, is literally Japanese-style writing. It is distinguished by the use of *kana*—Japanese syllabary which was used to represent Japanese sounds. Nonetheless, some Chinese characters were interspersed in the narrative depending on the author and time period in which it was written. *Wabun* was the language spoken by the Japanese aristocracy of the mid-to-late Heian period. Heian aristocrats were very fond of poetry and sought to express themselves through this medium—a pastime Japanese still consider to be a mark of artistic accomplishment. However, women were not sufficiently educated in the Chinese language to use *kanbun* to write poetry and began to write using the spoken language instead. In this way, *wabun* emerged as an identifiable form by the tenth century. *Wabun* is often described as soft, flowery and richly descriptive. It reflected the privileged lifestyle of the Heian aristocracy. It was also much more accessible to larger segments of the ruling elites than *kanbun*.

*The Tale of Genji* was written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Murasaki Shikibu (978-1014). It is a work of narrative fiction with a “realistic” plot, when compared to other works of the same period. The work details the successful and unsuccessful romantic adventures of Prince Genji, the son of an imperial concubine. Many scholars believe that inspiration for some of the events in the work came from the life and exploits of the most politically powerful man in Japan at the time: the courtier (and advisor to the emperor) Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1028). *The Tale of Genji* was generally well known in Heian court circles and has come to be considered one of the most important works of long form prose ever composed.

*The Pillow Book* was composed at roughly the same time as *The Tale of Genji*. It was written by Sei Shōnagon (966-1017), who was a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Sadako (977-1001). Unlike *The Tale of Genji*, *The Pillow Book* is a work of observations, of events and personalities of the Imperial court. The author relates stories of romance—both requited and unrequited—directly but with decorum. She was not above sharing gossip, if it suited her purposes. Her insights reveal the aesthetic of the Heian court—how they played, lived, worked and even dressed. In short, her depiction of the Heian court, along with Murasaki Shikibu’s *Genji* (and her diary), provides a depiction of Heian Japan which would otherwise have severely limited our knowledge of the age. Their works are all the more important because they provide a woman’s perspective—something sorely lacking even in the western world in the same period.

## **Society**

**The Development of Social Classes.** The stratification of society began in earnest in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Prior to that time, virtually everyone was somehow involved in or linked to subsistence agriculture—either cultivation, storage, distribution or protection. Even religious figures spent time beseeching the spirits to provide good harvests. As political and social structures began to mature, larger segments of the population were removed from cultivation and were engaged in more specialized pursuits. This led to a recognizable triangle-shaped social structure of monarchs, aristocrats, clergy, bureaucrats, skilled laborers, village leaders all the way down to peasants. Still, 95% + of the population were peasants. Most lived in small villages and rarely had contact with anyone other than other villagers, village headmen, low-ranking clergy, a few skilled laborers and perhaps itinerant peddlers. Most peasants had little to no access to education and lived lives similar to their immediate ancestors. Dwellings were small, hand built and had thatched roofs, small windows and rudimentary chimneys.

**Gender Roles.** Both peasant men and women worked hard or didn't live long. Women were generally keepers of home and hearth. Their primary job was to gather and prepare food, and men worked the fields and rice paddies. However, it should be noted that during planting and harvest seasons, both genders and all age groups could be found in the paddies. Indeed, religious festivals grew up around women transplanting rice into flooded paddies. Men sometimes hunted and trapped animals if they had access to forests and other lands.

**Local Government.** Village life revolved around family and the village headman. He was the intermediary between government officials who set rice (tax) quotas and the peasants. His job was to collect the tax, keep the peace and settle disputes before they came to the attention of officials above the village level. It is believed that spouses were selected by parents; and girls in particular were married at a very young age. If sufficiently nourished, women spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing and could expect to lose a significant number of their offspring to injury or illness in childhood.

**Normative Behavior for the Aristocracy.** Aristocratic society was highly ritualized and refined in the Heian periods. Virtually all lived in the city of Heian. Men were head of household, generally well educated and earned a living. Women were a part of public life mostly insofar as they were objects of desire and/or wooing by men or vice versa. Many aristocratic women were literate (at least partially) and free to attend parties and poetry exhibitions but could not expect to rise to positions of leadership outside of their homes—and no woman has become emperor or shogun since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Aristocratic men were expected to marry for politics and take second wives, concubines or mistresses for love. Women, however, could only be married to one man at a time. Principal wives were expected to remain faithful during childbearing years. Divorce, however, was acceptable and remarriage legal for both genders. Aristocratic women lived in a society which glamorized the taking of lovers and were largely free to participate. Both genders controlled who they had affairs with and could spurn a potential lover or suitor at will.

### Economy

**Agriculture.** The economy of Nara and Heian Japan was based on rice and other agricultural products. Skilled laborers such as masons, smithies, carpenters, coopers, fletchers and the like were able to ply their trade and made a good living. But they, like all others, supported agriculture. In the early years, tax assessments were determined by how much rice each parcel of land produced. Rice came to represent life and wealth was measured not by land alone, but by how much rice it produced.

**The System of Landholding.** It was in the best interests of the monarchy during the Nara and Heian periods for peasants to expand land under cultivation because it would enlarge the tax base, enrich the imperial treasury and provide additional calories for population expansion. After the Taika reforms of 7<sup>th</sup> centuries which set out a rational system of landholding, peasants were encouraged to engage in the very, very labor intensive work of transforming land into rice paddies. Few did. Before the first grain of rice could be planted, trees had to be cleared, land leveled, rice paddy levees built, canals dug, sluice gates built and water diverted. Because of the difficulty of the work, peasants would only do this if given tax abatements for several years. In due course, this was forthcoming and it is believed that agriculture expanded some in most years. This was facilitated by a period of domestic peace and the institution of central government. As a result, government budgets in the Nara and early Heian periods came to rely on constant growth decade after decade. However, this period of economic expansion did not last forever. There are many reasons for this. First, most land that could be easily brought under cultivation was transformed early on in the process. Second, land under intensive cultivation became exhausted of nutrients and was abandoned. Third, corrupt government officials demanded extortionist-rates of tax payments. At times these became so high that land was seized and brought under the control of aristocrats who did not pay tax. And then there was the curious phenomenon of aristocrats going to economically-strapped peasants with a promise of lower taxes (rent) if they gave their land to tax exempt aristocrats.

**Shōen.** Slowly, vast estates called *shōen* began to emerge which paid for the profligate lifestyles of Heian era aristocrats. The life of the peasant didn't change much. But for the Heian aristocrats who had found a way to finance their existence, they had also sown the seeds of systemic economic collapse. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial treasury was nearly empty, which diminished the ability of the government to carry out its essential functions. The very rural areas which produced rice (and wealth) began to give rise to their own elites, many of whom were connected to one or more of the warrior clans.

**Coinage.** During the Nara and Heian periods, trade within the country was facilitated by government control of minting. The first coins were minted during the reign of Empress Gemmei (707-715). This was made possible by the discovery of large copper deposits in western Japan. But the Japanese also minted silver and gold coins. It is no surprise that most of these coins resembled coinage on the mainland. Small denominations were round, had a square hole in their center and were carried on a string. On the front were stamped the reign names of the monarch. Large denominations of copper, silver and gold were rectangular. Some had square holes in them, others did not. When paying tax, rice—which could sometimes be a form of currency—was exchanged for silver (the preferred specie for imperial tax collectors) and deposited into the treasury. In this way, a nationwide economy allowed for the exchange of food stuffs and other trade goods.

### Readings

- 1) Karl Friday, ed. *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*, (Westview Press, 2012), pp. 77-188.
- 2) Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court*, (University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- 3) Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, (Kodansha America and Knopf Press, 1964)
- 4) Richard Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 5) Karl Friday, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (Stanford University Press, 1992).
- 6) Paul Varley, *Warriors of Japan: As Portrayed in the War Tales*, (University of Hawaii Press, 1994)

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) Japanese government was slow to develop when compared to China, Korea and others in East Asia. What elements of society finally combined to allow for the emergence of a single ruling household and a unified government? Did ancient Japan develop because of the application of new technology? Was it because of the importation of new ideas on statehood? Was it the adoption of a writing system? Was it because of advances in agriculture? Was it because of immigration? Was it because of one person's dynamic personality? Was it because of a new legal system? Or was it because of a combination of one or more of the above ideas? Perhaps it was something else altogether?
- 2) The Heian period in Japan (794-1185) is known as the "golden age" of Japanese history. Why do you think historians would describe the period this way? What was good about it? Was it the economy, the military, the arts, literature, or the government? We know that the aristocratic class lived very well and enjoyed life. But how widely was Heian period prosperity enjoyed? What about the average person? Do we know how the average person lived? Is it relevant or important to ask about the plight of the peasants or lower gentry?
- 3) Amid the glories of the Heian period, historians recognize a system that slowly became unsustainable. What weaknesses in the system might those be? What was slowing going wrong that later played a role in the collapse of civilian rule and its gradual replacement by the military? Was there an economic or agrarian downturn, an ecological problem, or a series of natural disasters? Was the fragmentation of the political elites the problem, or was it the usurpation of power by one or more people? What about the tax base and the system of landholding? In short, what caused the collapse of the Heian system and could it have been averted with strong, decisive and farsighted action?

## Texts

1) From the *Nihongi*, 720 CE (The Chronicles of Japan), translated by W. G. Aston, 1896, pp. 128-133. The Constitution of Prince Shōtoku. In the public domain.

C.E. 604, Summer, 4<sup>th</sup> Month, 3<sup>rd</sup> day. The Prince Imperial Shōtoku in person prepared laws for the first time. There were seventeen clauses, as follows:

1. Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided. Everyone has his biases, and few men are far-sighted. Therefore some disobey their lords and fathers and keep up feuds with their neighbors. But when the superiors are in harmony with each other and the inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly and the right view of matters prevails.

2. The three treasures, which are Buddha, the (Buddhist) Law and the (Buddhist) Priesthood; should be given sincere reverence, for they are the final refuge of all living things. Few men are so bad that they cannot be taught their truth.

3. Do not fail to obey the commands of your Sovereign. He is like Heaven, which is above the Earth, and the vassal is like the Earth, which bears up Heaven. When Heaven and Earth are properly in place, the four seasons follow their course and all is well in Nature. But if the Earth attempts to take the place of Heaven, Heaven would simply fall in ruin. That is why the vassal listens when the lord speaks, and the inferior obeys when the superior acts. Consequently when you receive the commands of your Sovereign, do not fail to carry them out or ruin will be the natural result.

4. The Ministers and officials of the state should make proper behavior their first principle, for if the superiors do not behave properly, the inferiors are disorderly; if inferiors behave improperly, offenses will naturally result. Therefore when lord and vassal behave with propriety, the distinctions of rank are not confused: when the people behave properly the Government will be in good order.

5. Deal impartially with the legal complaints which are submitted to you. If the man who is to decide suits at law makes gain his motive, and hears cases with a view to receiving bribes, then the suits of the rich man will be like a stone flung into water, meeting no resistance, while the complaints of the poor will be like water thrown upon a stone. In these circumstances the poor man will not know where to go, nor will he behave as he should.

6. Punish the evil and reward the good. This was the excellent rule of antiquity. Therefore do not hide the good qualities of others or fail to correct what is wrong when you see it. Flatterers and deceivers are a sharp weapon for the overthrow of the state, and a sharp sword for the destruction of the people. Men of this kind are never loyal to their lord, or to the people. All this is a source of serious civil disturbances.

7. Every man has his own work. Do not let the spheres of duty be confused. When wise men are entrusted with office, the sound of praise arises. If corrupt men hold office, disasters and tumult multiply. In all things, whether great or small, find the right man and they will be well managed. Therefore the wise sovereigns of antiquity sought the man to fill the office, and not the office to suit the man. If this is done the state will be lasting and the realm will be free from danger.

8. Ministers and officials should attend the Court early in the morning and retire late, for the whole day is hardly enough for the accomplishment of state business. If one is late in attending Court, emergencies cannot be met; if officials retire early, the work cannot be completed.

9. Good faith is the foundation of right. In everything let there be good faith, for if the lord and the vassal keep faith with one another, what cannot be accomplished? If the lord and the vassal do not keep faith with each other, everything will end in failure.

10. Let us control ourselves and not be resentful when others disagree with us, for all men have hearts and each heart has its own leanings. The right of others is our wrong, and our right is their wrong. We are not unquestionably sages, nor are they unquestionably fools. Both of us are simply ordinary men. How can anyone lay down a rule by which to distinguish right from wrong? For we are all wise sometimes and foolish at others. Therefore, though others give way to anger, let us on the contrary dread our own faults, and though we may think we alone are in the right, let us follow the majority and act like them.

11. Know the difference between merit and demerit, and deal out to each its reward and punishment. In these days, reward does not always follow merit, or punishment follow crime. You high officials who have charge of public affairs, make it your business to give clear rewards and punishments.

12. Do not let the local nobility levy taxes on the people. There cannot be two lords in a country; the people cannot have two masters. The sovereign is the sole master of the people of the whole realm, and the officials that he appoints are all his subjects. How can they presume to levy taxes on the people.

13. All people entrusted with office should attend equally to their duties. Their work may sometimes be interrupted due to illness or their being sent on missions. But whenever they are able to attend to business they should do so as if they knew what it was about and not obstruct public affairs on the grounds they are not personally familiar with them.

14. Do not be envious! For if we envy others, then they in turn will envy us. The evils of envy know no limit. If others surpass us in intelligence, we are not pleased; if they are more able, we are envious. But if we do not find wise men and sages, how shall the realm be governed?

15. To subordinate private interests to the public good—that is the path of a vassal. Now if a man is influenced by private motives, he will be resentful, and if he is influenced by resentment he will fail to act harmoniously with others. If he fails to act harmoniously with others, the public interest will suffer. Resentment interferes with order and is subversive of law.

16. Employ the people in forced labor at seasonable times. This is an ancient and excellent rule. Employ them in the winter months when they are at leisure, but not from Spring to Autumn, when they are busy with agriculture or with the mulberry trees (the leaves of which are fed to silkworms). For if they do not attend to agriculture, what will there be to eat? If they do not attend to the mulberry trees, what will there be for clothing?

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

2) From *The Tale of Genji*, first published in 1008 CE. A poetic account of a failed nighttime assignation between Michinaga no Fujiwara, the most powerful man in Japan and the author, Murasaki Shikibu. In the public domain.

*Michinaga:*

“How sad for him who stands the whole night long  
Knocking on your cedar door  
Tap-tap-tap like the cry of the kuina bird.”

*Murasaki Shikibu's response:*

“Sadder for her who had answered the kuina's tap,  
For it was no innocent bird who stood there knocking on the door”

3) From the *Nihongi*, 720 CE (The Chronicles of Japan), translated by W. G. Aston, 1896, pp. 278-279. The Emperor Nintoku. In the public domain.

4<sup>th</sup> year, Spring, 2<sup>nd</sup> month, 6<sup>th</sup> day. The Emperor addressed his ministers, saying: we ascended a lofty tower and looked far and wide, but no smoke arose in the land. From this, we gather that the people are poor, and that in the houses there are none cooking rice. we have heard that in the reigns of the wise sovereigns of antiquity, from everyone was heard the sound of songs hymning their virtue, in every house there was the ditty, “How happy are we.” But now when we observe the people, for three years past, no voice of eulogy is heard; the smoke of cooking has become rarer and rarer. By this we know that the five grains do not come up, and that the people are in extreme want. Even in the Home provinces there are some who are not supplied; what must it be in the provinces outside of our domain?

3<sup>rd</sup> month, 21<sup>st</sup> day. The following decree was issued: “From this time forward, for the space of three years, let forced labor be entirely abolished, and let the people have rest from toil.” From this day forth his robes of state and shoes did not wear out, and none were made. The warm food and hot broths did not become sour or putrid, and were not renewed. He disciplined his heart and restrained his impulses so that he discharged his functions without effort.

Therefore, the Palace enclosure fell to ruin and was not rebuilt: the thatch decayed, and was not repaired; the wind and rain entered by the chinks and soaked the coverlets; the starlight filtered through the decayed places and exposed the bed mats. After this the wind and rain came in due season, the five grains produced in abundance. For the space of three autumns the people had plenty, the praises of his virtue filled the land, and the smoke of cooking was also thick.

7<sup>th</sup> year, summer, 4<sup>th</sup> month, 1<sup>st</sup> day. The Emperor was on his tower and looking far and wide, saw smoke arising plentifully. On this day he addressed the Empress, saying: “We are now prosperous. What can there be to grieve for?” The Empress answered and said: “What dost thou mean by prosperity?” The Emperor said: “It is doubtless when the smoke fills the lands, and the people freely attain to wealth.” The Empress went on to say: “The Palace enclosure is crumbling down, and there are no means of repairing it; the buildings are dilapidated so that the coverlets are exposed. Can this be called prosperity?” The Emperor said: “When Heaven establishes a Prince, it is for the sake of the people. The Prince must therefore make the people the foundation. For this reason the wise sovereigns of antiquity, if a single one of their subjects was cold and starving, cast the responsibility on themselves. Now the people's poverty is no other than Our poverty; the people's prosperity is none other than Our prosperity. There is no such thing as the people's being prosperous and yet the Prince in poverty.”

## PART 2: LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

The period after the Gempei War (1180-1185) is best described as one of transition. The old civilian system embodied in the Heian court continued to exist, but over a period of two centuries was supplanted by an increasingly important military system initiated by the first shōgun, Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199). By the time of the Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281, the military was ascendant in the political and social realm. The transformation of Japan continued apace during the Ashikaga period (1335-1477), when the second shōgunal dynasty oversaw the continued devolution of power to the feudal lords in the provinces. The final step in this process was the Ōnin War (1467-1477), which resulted in the complete destruction of Kyoto, the only city in Japan. For a century afterwards, Japan had no cultural center, no central authority and no government, although both a titular emperor and Ashikaga shōgun still existed. In spite of all these problems, Japanese cultural development continued, matured and was in many ways, defined in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Ashikaga shoguns, in particular, are well known for patronizing the arts and for supporting Tea Ceremony, Nō drama and the literary and visual arts. It was, in many ways, a foundational era for traditional Japanese culture. This period also gave rise to many of the samurai traditions, which were, in part, based on Zen Buddhist aesthetics and teachings supported by the Ashikaga. Still, many great lords in Japan during the Warring States period (1477-1600) sought to unify the country under their command, but this process would have to wait until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### Events

**Kamakura.** Having defeated the Taira in the Gempei War (1180-1185), the Minamoto had no intention of being drawn into the court intrigue of Heian Japan. Yoritomo believed this had contributed to the downfall of his rivals, the Taira. When the fighting was over, Yoritomo simply set up his military government (*bakufu*) in the city of Kamakura where his wife, Hōjō Masako, lived. Initially, there wasn't much change in Japan because the civilian government still existed—although in a diminished state. Before long, however, Yoritomo began to issue decrees which had the same effect as law. He had fourteen years to act as shōgun before his death in 1199 after falling from a horse—a rather ignominious end for the great warrior. His sons, Yorie and Sanetomo, were not suited to govern and required a regent—which became, of course, Hōjō Tokimasa—Yoritomo's father-in-law. Tokimasa created a system whereby, the Hōjō regents sought out members of the Minamoto clan to act as titular shōguns until the year 1333. One of the greatest ironies of Yoritomo's legacy is that, even though he had struggled all his early life against the Taira, a branch family of the Taira, the Hōjō, governed Japan as regents for more than a century after his death. In the end, Taira Kiyomori had actually won.

**Mongol Invasions.** The Hōjō regency had been very successful in dealing with the existential threat posed by Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281. Thousands of samurai had died and areas of Kyūshū where the fighting had taken place suffered from the privations of war. The ongoing threat of another Mongol invasion (which never occurred) from 1281 until the great Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan died in the year 1294 effectively bankrupted the treasury. Twenty years of war (or imminent threat of war) and the threat of cultural annihilation at the hands of the Mongol hordes had unified Japan in a way rarely seen before the modern era. However, Japan was traumatized and war weary.

**Go-Daigo.** In the year 1318, a new emperor of Japan assumed the throne: Go-Daigo. Unlike his predecessors, Go-Daigo was a grown man, at least 30 years old and fully capable of engaging in the rough and tumble politics of the time. He was not particularly happy about being a political pawn and fervently believed that Japanese emperors should rule as well as reign. When, in the year 1331 he was forced to abdicate by the regent Hōjō Takatoki to make way for a new emperor, he raised a small army which was quickly defeated. He was then exiled, but escaped in 1333 and succeeded in having himself named emperor with help from military men such as Kusunoki Masashige (1294-1336) and Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358). This ended the Hōjō regency. Go-Daigo then set about trying to rule as well as reign. In 1334 when it became clear that he was going to actually wield power as the sovereign, something which not been done in many centuries, the military men who supported him began to fall away and he was removed by Ashikaga Takauji in 1336.

**Ashikaga Takauji.** Ashikaga Takauji, though named Shōgun in 1338, was more of a “first among equals” than all powerful ruler. Japan can best be described as a (mostly) decentralized state. Feudal lords (*daimyō*) ruled the territory under their control with minimal interference from the shōgun. A balance of power among the feudal lords

existed, but alliances were ever shifting in an effort to limit the power of any single *daimyō*. Nonetheless, Ashikaga shōguns still held court in Kyoto and wielded considerable power and influence for the first century or so of the Ashikaga (Muromachi) period.

**A Crisis.** The shōgun during middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was Ashikaga Yoshimasa. Yoshimasa was reportedly a capable, hands-on administrator in his early years. Increasingly, however, the task of ruling the country became an impossibility for even the most engaged executive. After a couple of decades, he developed other interests and decided to retire from office. When the topic of shōgunal succession arose, a crisis was at hand—one which, combined with other factors, would lead to full scale fighting. Recognizing the dangers of warfare in the only urban center in Japan, the (now) retired shōgun Yoshimasa issued orders that the leader of any army initiating hostilities in Kyoto would be branded a traitor—regardless of the circumstances. However, this did little to stop armies from posturing and maneuvering just outside the capital when it suited their interests. Indeed, a conflict between rival clans—the Hosokawa and the Yamana in the year 1467 lit the spark which resulted the total destruction of the city and the end of central government in Japan.

**Devastation.** The Ōnin War lasted approximately 10 years. Most of the battles were fought in and around Kyoto. By the time the conflict was over, neither the Hosokawa nor the Yamana existed as national or even regional powers. Most of the other great *daimyō* in central Hōnshu had either participated in or were allied with a participant. Many clans had been defeated by their rivals. Others had been overthrown by their retainers when they grew weak from incessant fighting. It is safe to say that the political and cultural landscape of central Hōnshu and Kyoto would have been unrecognizable to someone who had been away from the city for more than a decade. Kyoto was in ruins. The chronicles tell of foxes and wolves roaming the city, of corpses choking the streets, of thousands of buildings burned. It was a scene of absolute horror. Civilization lay in ruins. Though there was an emperor and Ashikaga shōgun, there was no effective central authority and no victorious army. The last armies that occupied Kyoto simply left after a few months because there was nothing left worth fighting over. This ushered in a period of political fragmentation unlike anything seen in Japan since before the Nara period. Local and regional warlords dominated their fiefs, schemed to defeat their rivals and become the leader of a reunified Japan. None would succeed for approximately a century. Japan had entered the Warring States (*sengoku*) period.

## **Government**

**Structure.** The changes brought about by the Gempei War (1180-1185) were incremental. Even though there was a shogun, Minamoto Yoritomo didn't immediately move to seize absolute power and to completely replace the civilian structure. Instead, Yoritomo moved to control first his own clan and retainers with the creation of the *mandokuro* (which oversaw administration and finance) and then, over a decade or so, came to appoint additional officials in the provinces. One of his first moves was to appoint *shugo*, a position best described as constable or military administrator. It is not entirely clear whether or not he was protecting the people in each province or protecting his own (new) prerogatives. Nonetheless, over the decades, the warriors in these positions came to work alongside governors appointed by the civilian administration. Many *shūgo* passed these positions down to their sons and successors and came to control the land in their own right. They became known as *daimyō*, a term best understood as regional lord in a feudal system. Another position Yoritomo created was *jitō*. These were “land stewards” or civilian administrators whose job it was to manage the finances of estates—some of which were quite large. They were, above all to oversee the collection of taxes and generally carry out the will of the shōgun in the provinces. Just like with many *shugo*, a significant number of *jitō* transitioned from being representatives of the shōgun to being medieval *daimyō*. In this way, the old Heian system where courtiers working for the emperor in the provinces slowly became wealthy and powerful, transitioned to include a different set of elites. Though it took approximately a century, power and authority increasingly devolved away from the capital city of Kyoto to Kamakura—and more importantly—to the provinces. By the time of the Mongol invasions, both the central court and courtiers enjoyed power mostly insofar as it originated from Kamakura. Still, both the civil and military authorities continued to exist side by side, with overlapping legal and military jurisdictions.

**Jōei Code.** In 1232, the Hōjō regent Yasutoki handed down a series of legal codes in the aftermath of the *Jōkyū* war, the failed attempt by a retired emperor to regain some power from Kamakura. It contained a series of fifty-one articles which clarified many discrepancies which had arisen as the old Heian era *ritsuryō* legal system slowly became unworkable in the new age. Among other things, it effectively established the primacy of the shōgunal authority but required warriors to respect higher officials, in particular religious institutions and whatever remained

of the civilian structures and court systems. It started as a relatively simple document which was mostly directed at the new warrior elites. However, over the course of time, it became extremely complicated and was expanded to include even non-warriors nationwide. It was superseded by the Ashikaga and other shōguns, but a number of basic concepts remained until 1868.

**The Military.** A loyal, standing army controlled by a ruling emperor had ceased to exist long before the Gempei War ended in 1185. Powerful cliques in Heian Japan (794-1185) each called upon their own military units to protect their own interests beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In general, two families—the Taira—who had lost in the Gempei War and the Minamoto—who had won, were the most prominent. But others existed, mostly as retainers to one of the two great families. After the Minamoto victory, Yoritomo sent out a number of his most trusted lieutenants to act as *shugo* and *jitō*. Some went back to their own home areas, others to completely new places. During the long period of the Hōjō regency, many of these families in the provinces emerged to exercise significant military influence in their own right. Under the titular command of the Hōjō regent, these armies controlled their own domains most of the time but could be called upon in time of national emergency. For example, the Hōjō called on the great families of Kyūshū and western Honshū during the first Mongol invasion in 1274 and 10,000 samurai responded. In the second in 1281, 40,000-50,000 samurai from all over Japan acted in defense of the realm. Japan was, for two decades, completely mobilized against foreign invasion. The military was rightly praised as the saviors of Japan and the myth of the samurai was born. It should be noted that these armies fought as small, independent units (and sometimes even as individual warriors) and not as one highly integrated, cohesive army. The structure of the military continued to devolve during the last years of the Hōjō regency and a sort of uneasy equilibrium came to exist. By the time of the Ashikaga shōgunate, no single family—not even the Ashikaga—could claim to be military hegemon of Japan without the consent and/or alliance of one or more of the other great families.

## Culture

**Zen Buddhism.** In the absence of a strong central government, the Ashikaga period (1336-1477) is remembered for cultural and religious development. Buddhism, in particular, enjoyed a renaissance. This was, in part, because Ashikaga Takauji himself embraced Buddhism as he aged and patronized the religion by funding the building of monasteries and temples. It was the Ashikaga who illuminated the connection between the warrior ethic (*bushidō*) and Zen Buddhism. Zen (Chan in China) had a long presence in Japan, but it was (and still is) a very small sect. Zen stressed an austere lifestyle, the clearing of the mind and the total abandonment of ego. These characteristics, when internalized by soldiers, yielded a disciplined, unselfish warrior, free from worldly attachments and willing to sacrifice his life in service to his lord.

**The Literary Arts.** Buddhist themes and plot lines dominated Japanese literature before the modern era. It was, quite simply the single most important idea permeating virtually all genres and all types of writing. This was, in part, because more clergy were literate when compared to the rest of the population and could read and write in far greater numbers than most other segments of society. The church, as an institution, also valued literacy as a way both to proselytize and to disciple their new converts. Itinerant priests traveled from village to village telling (or singing) stories—many of which were designed to be morality plays. They either had to be memorized or written down. However, religion occupied a more prominent role in some narratives than others. One example we have of literature which was very strongly influenced by Buddhism during the Kamakura era (1185-1333) is *Hōjōki* (An Account of My Hut). It was written in the year 1212 by the Buddhist monk Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216). Chōmei was a published author and celebrated poet at both the imperial and shōgunal courts. He was a low-ranking aristocrat but still held court rank. He is known for his compassion and his willingness to recognize suffering and misery in the lives of others. It is not known why he took the tonsure and became a monk in 1204, but he took the opportunity to remove himself from society and relocate into a tiny hut. From his perch on the south side of a mountain outside Kyoto, Chōmei chronicled a number of the catastrophes he witnessed down in the city. In his poems, he relates instances of fire, famine, loss, destruction and ponders on the impermanence of life. It is the quintessential work reflecting Buddhist values.

**Tsurezuregusa (Essays in Idleness).** *Essays in Idleness* was written by the Buddhist priest Kenkō Yoshida (1283-1352) in the first years of the 1330s. The festering political schism between the senior and junior branches of the Imperial family had finally broken out into open warfare due to the machinations of the Emperor Go-Daigo (1288-1339). In the end, neither Go-Daigo nor the Hōjō regents to the Kamakura Shōgunate survived the turmoil. Instead, a new general seized power and became the next shogun: Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358)—ushering in an entirely

new period in Japanese history called the Ashikaga Era (1336-1477). Kenkō was not involved in the fighting or the scheming at court because he had taken the tonsure a few years earlier. Having been a court poet, he still participated in poetry recitation gatherings at the palace during the transition. *Essays in Idleness* reflects a sense of foreboding, that Japan was entering a degenerate age. And he was correct. Kenkō's observations, idle though they were, reflected Buddhist theology on the ephemeral nature the world.

**The Fine Arts. Tea Ceremony.** The Ashikaga period is remembered for the adoption of Tea Ceremony (*Cha-no-yu*). Tea Ceremony reflects the austere lifestyle of Zen. It is highly stylized and very formal. It is still practiced as an art in Japan and is an activity that all cultured Japanese aspire to participate in at some point in their lives. The austere aesthetic is also evident in some of the representative architecture of the time. For example, the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) in Kyoto was built during the reign of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (the third Ashikaga shōgun) and later became a Zen monastery. In the dramatic and visual arts, the Ashikaga period saw the importation from China of new forms of monochrome painting. These forms, which were quickly adapted to reflect Japanese artistic sensibilities, were championed by artists such as Sesshū (1420-1506) who is reported to have been one of the first to have used ink splash techniques. Perhaps the most important and well known of the cultural arts introduced in the Muromachi period were Nō and Kyōgen. These forms, especially Nō, are still performed today and can be seen in most major cities in Japan on any given night.

## Society

**Structure.** The Gempei War (1180-1185) acted as the catalyst for systemic social change in Japan. During the Heian period (794-1185), society was generally stable and the emphasis was on the civilian sector, the expansion of land under cultivation and maintenance of a functional system. That does not mean, however that the plight of the peasantry was uniformly bright and rosy. Natural disasters, poor harvests, epidemics, capricious government officials, unpredictable and high taxes and the like were all visited upon the peasants from time to time. Life could be difficult. In general, village headmen worked to maintain good relations between different peasant family groups and local officials. Local officials saw to it that the tax was paid, peace was kept and provincial officials kept happy. In the last century or so of the Heian period, another element was added to the social mix: the military. Soldiers didn't fit into the neat categories of society as understood in a civilian system. They weren't government officials, clergy, skilled craftsmen, village headmen or peasants. They were not producers of anything and, by and large, not accountable to local officials. They were small in number but exercised great influence. They also often switched allegiances on the provincial or national level and were, in short, a sort of wild card in the late Heian period—a disruptive force.

After the Gempei War, warriors slowly began to play a larger and more important role in society. As first Minamoto Yoritomo and then the Hōjō Regents expanded their official role, warrior role in society was normalized. The *shugo* and *jitō* system carved out a place for them in society alongside the civilian sector. The Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281 and the continued threat of a third Mongol invasion until the death of the Mongol Emperor—Kublai Khan in 1294 played a significant role in the continued shift away from the civilian system to more and more military control. For approximately two decades, the needs of the civilian sector were subsumed to the needs of national defense. Society was mobilized to face the threat of total annihilation posed by the Mongols. Smithies, fletchers, coopers, swordsmiths, armorers, and the like provided goods and services for the campaign against the Mongols. Peasants grew the food, the government helped distribute it to the military and even the clergy offered up prayers for deliverance. When the threat passed, the Hōjō were bankrupt but the military all across the country then came to occupy a central position in society. As Japan passed into the Ashikaga period (1336-1477), society was ordered around the military and became, as the prominent historian Thomas Conlon argues a “State of War.” This social system continued to evolve over the course of many centuries. But the concept of the centrality of the warrior in society remained, in one form or another, until after the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

## Economy

**Agriculture.** The economy of late post classical Japan was based on agriculture, and in particular, the production of rice. Rice was (and is) the single most important food stuff in Japan. Japanese eat it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It is used as a starch and can even be made into sweets. Rice also acted as the basis of land holding for much of Japanese history. Land holdings were not only determined by geographic measurement, but by the fertility of land under wet rice cultivation. This is because Japan is mostly mountainous and unsuitable for cultivation. Therefore, wealth (and one's tax) bill every year was determined as a percentage of that which was produced. For example, a

large and successful landowner might own land that produced 1,000 koku (1 koku equals approximately 5 bushels and is normally enough to feed one man per year) of rice. The yearly tax rate might be 300-400 (or more) koku. Rice was then traded for silver and made its way into the treasury. It should be noted that the average peasant didn't cultivate more than a few koku of rice per year nor did he regularly eat rice before the modern era. It was simply too dear to be consumed by the producers. Instead, peasants often ate millet and vegetables. Meat was rarely consumed, largely because of its expense and because of Buddhist considerations. If close to the coast or fresh water sources, fish and other aquatic life provided protein, as did tofu. As might be expected, industries grew up in Japan to support tertiary agricultural pursuits such as fishing and sericulture.

**Commerce.** As Japan moved through the Heian period, commerce grew dramatically. The imposition of law and order along with a transportation infrastructure and the like made it possible for goods to be transported from the rural areas to the capital, the only urban area of any size and consequence. Indeed, the city of Heian/Kyoto was known for trade in food stuffs, tea and items such as silk, a textile that first arrived in Japan in the Yayoi period (300BCE-300CE). Merchants in the late post classical age generally made a good living and participated in the culture of the city. However, during periods of instability and war, merchants were some of the first to suffer. In particular, when Kyoto was destroyed in the Ōnin War (1467-1477) commerce largely ceased altogether. Given that there was no central authority, commerce between domains also became problematic and continued that way until reunification had been achieved in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. For most of the Warring States period (1477-1600), commerce was possible only between two non-warring domains, a condition that sometimes existed but which was unpredictable. Even when commerce was possible, each domain set up its own checkpoints on major roads where tolls could be collected and papers checked. The control of coinage also became a problem as civilian authority devolved in the aftermath of the Gempei War (1180-1185). The debasement of coinage was one way to raise revenue, but it also led to inflation. In the early Ashikaga period, commerce was tricky because specie had to be weighed and carefully calibrated. And of course, after the Ōnin War, each great *daimyō* was free to mint their own coinage as they pleased. Commerce therefore suffered from a lack of central authority, a lack of law and order, a lack of freedom of movement and the lack of a nationwide monetary system. In spite of it all, Japanese merchants persevered and emerged in the Edo period (1600-1868) to become some of the great trading houses/companies of the contemporary era.

### Readings

- 1) Karl Friday, ed. *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*, (Westview Press, 2012), pp. 189-308.
- 2) Thomas Conlan, *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth Century Japan*, (University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies, 2003).
- 3) Pierre Francois Souyri, *The World Turned Upside Down: Medieval Japanese Society*, (Columbia University Press, 2003).
- 4) Andrew Goble, *Kenmu: Go-Daigo's Revolution*, (Harvard University Asia Center, 1996).
- 5) Mikael Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōbei in Japanese History*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2007).
- 6) Paul Varley, *The Ōnin War: History of its Origins and Background. With a Selective Translation of the Chronicle of the Ōnin*, (Columbia University Press, 1967).

### Questions for Discussion

1) The Gempei War marked the end of an era. The civilian government which characterized most of the Heian period was replaced by a military government. This shift, however, took many years to complete. What was the impetus for this shift? Wasn't it possible to retain many civilian institutions? Why did the new shōgunate feel it was necessary to put into place not just their own personnel, but to create a large number of entirely new bureaucratic positions? Meanwhile, what happened to the old civilian offices and office holders? Were they discarded and removed or retained but given a more limited portfolio? In other words, how did Minamoto Yoritomo

and the Hōjō Regency remake the structure of Japanese government? Did this have a negative or positive effect on Japan?

2) The Mongol juggernaut seemed to be an unstoppable force for virtually all the people groups they encountered. Neither the Europeans states, the Russian princes, the Persians, nor the Chinese were able to put up an effective defense against the overwhelming military might of the Mongol hoards. Yet, the Japanese leadership decided to stand and fight and, if unsuccessful, risked cultural oblivion. What motivated the Hōjō to take such a firm stance knowing the stakes? Was this decision a “fool’s courage” or was it a calculated risk? Though successful in their defense, Japan was forever changed by their brush with annihilation. What effect did the Mongol invasions have on the culture, government and economy of Japan?

3) The Ōnin War was more than a civil war. It led to the end of central government for more than a century and to near cultural collapse. What would motivate the Japanese warlords of the era to fight until there was nothing left to fight over? Were they unable to understand the consequences of their actions or did they not care if Japan was plunged in the Warring States period? Why did it take so long for a new leader of Japan to emerge? What challenges specific to Japan in the Warring States period did they face as they sought to bring order to chaos? During the Warring States period, was Japan in a state of cultural stasis? Or did culture continue to evolve and find expression?

## Texts

1) “The Splendor of Kiyomori.” From the *Heike Monogatari*, (compiled in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century), found in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Vol. 45, 1919, by A. L. Sadler*. Chapter 5: In the public domain.

Not only did Kiyomori himself live in splendor and luxury, but all his house likewise shared his prosperity. His eldest son Shigemori was Naidaijin and Sadaisho, his second son Munemori was Chunagon and Udaisho, his third son Tomomori was Chujo of the third grade, his eldest grandson Koremori Shosho of the fourth grade; sixteen of his house in all held offices of the higher grade (Kugyo), while thirty had right of entry to Court. The whole number of his family who drew revenues from the provinces as military officials were about sixty persons. All others who appeared are of no account in the world. Since long ago in the era of Nara no Mikado the office of Nakae-no-Taisho was first instituted in the fifth year of Shingi, and Nakae was changed to Konoe in the fourth year of Daido, only on three or four occasions have brothers occupied the offices of the Right and Left together. In the time of Montoku Tenno, on the Left was Yoshifusa as Sadaijin-no-Sadaisho, on the Right, Yoshisuke as Dainagon no Udaisho; they were the sons of Fuyutsugu, the retired Sadaijin. In the time of Shujo-in, Saneyori Ono no-miya dono was Minister of the Left and Morosuke Kujo dono of the Right; they were sons of Teijin Ko. In the time of Go-Rei-zei-in, Norimichi O-nijo dono was Minister of the Left and Yorimune Horikawa dono of the Right; they were the sons of the Kwampaku Mido. In the time of Nijo-in, Motofusa Matsu dono was Minister of the Left, and Kanezane Tsuki-no-wa dono of the Right; they were the sons of Hoseiji dono. All these were the sons of Regents. Among the sons of ordinary people there is no precedent.

2) “Kusunoki Masashige: A Guerrilla of Unflinching Loyalty.” Found in *Legends of the Samurai*, compiled and translated by Hiroaki Sato, (New York: Overlook Press, 1995), pp. 186-187.

Captain of the Imperial Police Kusunoki Masashige turned to his brother, Sword bearer Masasue, and said, “Our enemies have cut us off from front and rear, and we’ve been separated from our command post. We now have no way of getting out of this. Let’s first smash into the enemies in front and drive them around, then fight the enemies behind us!”

That’s a good idea,” Masasue agreed.

Then, with their 700 horsemen in front and back, they galloped into the great mass of enemies. The soldiers under Chief of the Imperial Stables of the Left Tadayoshi saw the banners with the crest of chrysanthemum and water, thought these were worthy enemies, and tried to isolate and kill Masashige and Masasue. But each brother cleaved through them from east to west and drove them from north to south. Each one, when he saw a worthy enemy, would gallop side by side with him, wrestle him down, and take his head; when the enemy was unworthy, he would strike him with a swing of the sword and run him

down. Masasue and Masashige met seven times and separated seven times. Each one's sole aim was to get close enough to Tadayoshi, wrestle him down and kill him.

Tadayoshi's 500,000 horsemen were pushed around so badly by Kusunoki's 700 that they started to turn back toward Ueno, of Suma. As they did, the horse Tadayoshi rode stepped on an arrowhead with his right foreleg and began limping. The Kusunoki force swiftly caught up and was about to strike at Tadayoshi, when Yakushiji Jūrō Jirō turned back and, as he met Tadayoshi on the bank of Lotus Pond, jumped off his horse and, brandishing a thirty-inch blade halberd held at its metal handle, slashed at the neck and chest straps of the oncoming enemy horses, in no time felling seven or eight of them. In the meantime Tadayoshi switched horses with Jūrō Jirō and escaped into the distance.

When General Takauji saw Chief Tadayoshi being drive back by Kusunoki and withdrawing, he issued an order, "Send in reinforcements! Don't let Tadayoshi be killed!"

At once, 6,000 horsemen of Kira, Ishitō, Kō, and Uesugi galloped to the east side of the Minato River and encircled the Kusunoki force to cut off its rear. Masashige and Masasue turned back and attacked these forces, killing or wrestling the enemies down as they galloped in and out of them. In about six hours they had sixteen engagements. Their force was reduced gradually, until only seventy-three riders remained.

Even with the small force they could have broken out of the enemy and escaped, but since leaving Kyoto, Kusunoki had had a mind to bid farewell to the world there, so he fought without retreating a step. But their spirit now drained, he and his men hurried into a house in a village north of the Minato River. When he removed his armor for disembowelment, he found eleven sword wounds on his body. Each of the remaining, seventy-two men also had five to ten wounds. The thirteen members of the Kusunoki clan and their sixty retainers sat in two rows in the guest room with six pillars, chanted a Buddhist prayer ten times in unison before disemboweling themselves.

Masashige, sitting at the head of the group, turned to his brother, Masasue, and asked, "They say your thought at the last moment determines whether your next life is going to be good or bad. Tell me brother, what is your wish in the Nine Realms?"

Masasue laughed cheerfully and said, "I'd like to be reborn in the Human Realm seven times so that I may destroy the imperial enemy.

Masashige was pleased to hear this and said, "That's a truly sinful, evil thought, but I think exactly as you do. Well then, let us be reborn in the same way and realize our wish."

With the vow the two brothers stabbed each other and died side by side. The eleven other principal members of the clan, including Governor of Kawachi Usami Masayasu, Jungūji no Tarō Masamoro, of the Middle Palace Guards, and Wada Gorō Masataka, as well as the sixty retainers, disemboweled themselves all at once, each sitting in the place of his choice.

Kikuchi Shichirō Takeyoshi, who had come to observe the battles in Suma as the representative of his older brother, the Governor of Higo, happened upon Masashige's death. Perhaps he thought it would be a disgrace to see something like this and return. He also killed himself and fell in the fire.

3) "On the Vanity of Human Desires." From *The Miscellany of a Japanese Priest (Tsurezure Guza)*, translated by William N. Porter, (London: Humphrey Milford, 1914), pp. 34-36. In the public domain.

He who afflicts his whole life by spending it in the pursuit of riches and fame, leaving himself no leisure for quiet, is but a fool.

However great his wealth may be, he is still too poor to safeguard himself; for his money is an agent which will only buy him misfortune and call in affliction. He may "pile up his gold even to the Great Bear," but his heirs after his death will have great anxieties, and he will soon weary of taking delight only in rejoicing the eyes of silly people. Though his carriages are big, his horses are fat, and he himself is adorned with gold and jewels, wise men will think him but a sad fool. Let him throw away his gold among the mountains and fling his jewels into the deepest pool, for there is no greater simpleton than he who is blinded by money.

Some men hope that, as their fame is not buried with them, it will remain long after they are dead. But could we say that a man had excelled because he had acquired high rank and great honor? For however, ignorant and foolish he is, if he comes of a good family or has good luck, he may rise to high rank and lead a life of luxury. The Wise Man (Mencius) and the Sage (Confucius), both very worthy, were themselves content with low rank. So that he who earnestly strives for high rank and office comes next in foolishness.

Others again aim at leaving behind them in the world the very best reputation for the capabilities and kindness. Yet on thinking it over carefully we find that this desire for fame is in reality love of praise. Those who may praise or blame, however, will not long be alive themselves, and those who may know of them by repute will soon be gone also. Whose censure, therefore, (need you fear) and whose commendation can you wish for? Moreover, praise leads only to blame. Therefore to leave a good name behind one is quite pointless, and he who aims at it comes next in foolishness.

If I may add a word of advice to those who seek persistently for knowledge and crave for learning—cleverness is productive of cunning and the worldly lusts are increased by ability. Knowledge gained by study and by listening to what is taught by others is not the true wisdom. Then what can we say is wisdom? for right and wrong are inextricably mixed together. And what can we say is goodness? A true man is above all (standards of) wisdom, virtue, ability or reputation. Who can properly appreciate him now, or hereafter? Not because he hides his virtues or pretends to be foolish, but because his whole existence is altogether beyond the limits of wisdom of folly, riches or poverty.

I have already written of the pursuit of riches and fame with an infatuated mind. Not only these but all things are profitless; not worth speaking of, not worth wishing for.