

JAPAN

A HISTORY



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CAPITAL OF PEACE
AND TRANQUILLITY

“PURPLE HILLS AND
CRYSTAL STREAMS”

By Western count, the year was 800, marked by Charlemagne's coronation. By Japanese count, it was Enryaku 19, the nineteenth full year in the reign of Kanmu, the fiftieth emperor of the island kingdom. In the West, the year was marked by a nine-month-long royal progress that traversed most of Frankland and terminated in Rome in late November. There, on Christmas Day, the conqueror of Italy, Spain, and Germany accepted the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, thus becoming the spiritual as well as the temporal master of Western Europe. In the East, the year 800 marked the official completion of Japan's magnificent new imperial capital. In the shadow of Mount Hiei, a sprawling and resplendent metropolis had risen under Emperor Kanmu's aegis, a city that he called Heian-kyō, Capital of Peace and Tranquility. That official designation never became popular, however, and later generations knew the city by a succession of other names - Miyako, Raku, Rakuyo. Ultimately it would be known as Kyoto, a name derived from two Chinese characters signifying "capital."

Viewed from Mount Hiei, ninth-century Heian-kyō was most unprepossessing - a vast parallelogram cross-hatched by intersecting avenues and composed almost entirely of single-story buildings roofed with tile, shingle, or thatch. From the city's southern gate the impression was altogether different, however, for from that point Heian-kyō's great central boulevard, Suzaku-ōji, stretched straight northward to the gates of the imperial enclosure, some two and a half miles distant. From this vantage, Heian-kyō's symmetry was absolute, its scale monumental, and its effect both calculated and immediate. Its grand geometry dwarfed the visitor, and its sweep accentuated the remoteness of the emperor, spiritual and temporal master of the Japanese people.

The year 800 was one of high promise in Western Europe as well as in Japan, for in both places years of factionalism and strife seemed, at last, to be giving way to a new and more stable order. Unhappily for the subject peoples of Western Europe, that promise was to dim with Charlemagne's death in 814 and disappear for a millennium in the internecine feuding that followed. Happily for the people of Kanmu's kingdom, the great capital that he established in the mist-shrouded foothills of Hiei not only survived the emperor but grew with a vigor and

speed that might have astonished its founder. Within a century of Kanmu's death, Heian-kyō could justifiably claim to be the second most important center of culture in the entire world, surpassed only by the Chinese capital of Chang'an - the city upon which Heian-kyō was openly modeled.

Japan's evolution from primitive agrarianism to aristocratic bureaucracy during this period represented the culmination of a process that actually began fully 1,000 years before the founding of Heian-kyō, for it was then that the cultural traits so closely associated with the Japanese people - political insularity, social rigidity, religious tolerance, and intense clan loyalty - began to develop. Those traits, which manifested themselves dramatically in the personality of Kanmu, were characteristics common to his people, making him less a shaper of history in the Carolingian mold than the embodiment of centuries of cultural transformation.

According to the annals of the Japanese imperial family, which claims the oldest unbroken dynastic line in the world, those years of transformation began in 600 BCE, the year traditionally assigned to the accession of Jimmu Tennō, the legendary first emperor of Japan. Archaeologists have probed tens of thousands of years deeper into the Japanese past, however, and their findings point to the existence of a culture on the islands at least 100,000 years ago. At that time, the Japanese archipelago was joined to the Asian mainland by a series of land bridges, but by Neolithic times the islands lay some 100 miles from the tip of the Korean peninsula. This geographic isolation helps explain the relatively late settlement of the archipelago in prehistoric times - and also the extraordinary homogeneity of the Japanese people in modern times.

The southern islands of Kyushu and Shikoku were to prove a fertile seedbed for migrant civilizations once the treacherous Korean Strait had been crossed, but for eons that gulf would loom broad and impassable. In fact, it seems likely that the islands were first settled by Asian immigrants driven east by pressures that an increasingly vigorous China was exerting along the periphery of its empire. Subsequent waves of migrants included: Proto-Negroid ancestors of the Malay, New Guinea, and Filipino peoples; Proto-Caucasoids, from whom the aboriginal Ainu of Japan's northern islands are presumed to be

descended; and, finally, a dominant group of Mongoloids who carried with them a sophisticated bronze and iron culture from the plains of inner Asia. Despite later infusions of Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian stock, there can be little question that it was these Mongoloids who established the first Japanese state, for it is their distinctive artifacts - the sword, the comma-shaped jewels known as *magatama*, and the bronze ritual mirror - that have been recognized through the centuries as symbols of imperial authority.

After 4500 BCE, there is increasing evidence of settled civilization, located in the southern and central regions of Japan. Shell middens, sunken pit dwellings, stone tools, and other relics - all dating from this period - have been found in profusion, but it is pottery of a highly sophisticated and almost baroque style that hallmarks the age. Indeed, that pottery, distinguished by its cord-marked design, or *jōmon*, has given a name to the first epoch in Japan's Neolithic history.

In the third century BCE, Jōmon culture was disrupted by the sudden appearance of a new and radically advanced wave of immigrants, the Yayoi, whose name is associated with an equally distinctive but far more austere style of pottery. Possibly driven from the mainland by the dynastic wars that attended the unification of China under the Ch'in and Han, these settlers rapidly displaced the Jōmon. So complete was this takeover that the Jōmon virtually disappeared as a cultural force, making the Yayoi the true ancestral culture of Japan. This Yayoi influx, which brought with it the advanced rice culture of the continent, also introduced the techniques of metalsmithing, animal husbandry, spinning, and bronze casting to Japan, hastening the country's conversion to a fully agrarian economy.

A distinctive feature of the Yayoi period, which lasted roughly from 200 BCE to CE 200, was the evolution of pronounced social stratification and particularly of clan organization, the kinship-based focus of traditional Japanese society. In a sense, such stratification was a logical outgrowth of the Yayoi invasion, for as the food supply became more stable and the population more sedentary, the topography of the land itself became increasingly important. Japan's numerous mountain vales and readily irrigated plains favored compartmentalization into small, self-contained communities that, in turn, fostered an intensific-

ation of individual tribal loyalties.

By the end of the Yayoi period, Japanese society had coalesced into distinct clan units, many of which were already beginning the process of amalgamation that would eventually unify them under the leadership of the imperial clan. Chinese emissaries traveling in Kyushu in the third century CE noted the proliferation of what they termed "countries" - the distinct territorial holdings of local tribes and clans. By this time, marked gradations of rank were already observable within these clans, and a distinct hierarchy was emerging, with society dividing into two interacting social entities: the *uji*, or clan proper, and the *be*, or guild. The former were composed of households that claimed common ancestry, had a common chieftain, and worshiped a common guardian deity; the latter were formed of subservient household communities associated through some common mode of service to the clans. These occupational groups constituted the bulk of the population, while the *uji* formed a loose aristocracy. *Uji* chieftains, who claimed descent from their clans' guardian deities, wielded ritual as well as social power - a fusion of sacerdotal and secular duties that was integral to the development of the state. In fact, the belief that government and cultic ritual were but two aspects of the same function - and therefore justifiably administered by one person - was so deeply ingrained in the Japanese nature that it endured well into the twentieth century.

During the Yayoi period there existed a wide diversity of clan cults, but over the ensuing centuries, those various rituals gradually fused into a body of uniform belief, one that would ultimately become known as Shinto, the state religion of Japan. This indigenous cult was by no means a complex religious system, for it stemmed in large measure from a primitive attunement to natural forces, which the early Japanese identified as immanent deities, or *kami*. From very early times, the people of Japan clearly felt a collective kinship with nature - and, by extension, with the particular deities believed to inhabit every aspect of the concrete world. Cultic ritual centered upon the rejection of all that threatened to taint or defile the sacredness attached to particular localities and their indwelling spirits, in turn fostering a respect for the legitimacy of previously established authority.