

HISTORY OF PRE-MODERN JAPAN

with reference to some important historical tourist sites

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Here we take a look at the development of pre-modern Japan from its earliest origins, through the development of a Japanese polity, into the Classical Period, and on to the Feudal Period which culminated in the ascent of Tokugawa after the momentous Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Appreciating this background will help us more fully understand modern and contemporary Japan.

HISTORY OF PRE-MODERN JAPAN	
PRE-HISTORY - Paleolithic ('Mythical Japan')	35,000 - 11,000 BC
JOMON Period - Neolithic - Indigenous societies, early polities	11,000 - 300 BC
YAYOI Period - Invasion! → wet rice, bronze, iron	300 BC - 300 AD
YAMATO (KOFUN) Period - Centralization & cultural consolidation	300 - 710
CLASSICAL PERIOD - Birth of nation-State and court-based control	
Asuka Period	538-710
Nara Period	710-792
Heian (Kyoto) Period	792-1185
FEUDAL PERIOD – Age of the Shoguns	
Kamakura Period	1185-1338
Muromachi Period (Ashikaga Shogunate)	1338-1570
Onin War - 10-Year Civil War	1467-77
Sengoku Period (Fragmented, Chaotic - Warring Warlords)	1477-1600
Azuchi (Nobunaga)-Momoyama (Hideyoshi) Period - Reunification	1570s-1600
Tokugawa (Edo) Period - 265 Years of Tokugawa Shoguns	1603-1868

c. 35000 BC - Neolithic hunter-gatherers migrate to Japan from Siberia via the Kurils. These migrants will become the Jomon people, ancestors of Japan's indigenous Ainu people.

11,000 BC- 300 AD - The **JOMON PERIOD**, so named for the cord-like decorative patterns used on their pottery. Mostly hunter-gatherers and fishermen. Shellfish were a major food source as evidenced by middens.

Japan's first emperor, the mythical Emperor Jimmu, great-grandson of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, is said to have ascended the throne in 660BC.

300 BC - 300 AD - The **YAYOI PERIOD** - Interlopers! (who we now know as the Japanese people) Japan was invaded by East Asian people from the Korean Peninsula. The term Yayoi comes from a major archaeological site around present-day Tokyo where characteristic new pottery styles were discovered. The Yayoi brought wet rice farming, metallurgy, and sedentary societal organization ('civilization'). They overwhelmed and absorbed the Jomon. Recent DNA analyses indicate that on average the DNA of modern Japanese is >90% Yayoi, <10% Jomon. Small Yayoi polities coalesced into larger kingdoms. Japan's 10th emperor, Emperor Sujin - the first to have historical verification versus solely mythological basis, ascended the throne c. 97BC.

4th to 6th century- KOFUN PERIOD – This period of large well-developed kingdoms is named for the *kofun* or burial mound tombs of its leaders. *Haniwa* tomb sculptures such as those in Tokyo National Museum date from this period. This same period is also called the **YAMATO PERIOD**, named for an area around Nara where a ruling family of the same name presided over a large and ascendant kingdom.

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD 538AD - 1181 AD

538 - 710 AD - The **ASUKA PERIOD** gets its name from a region south of Nara where its centralized court under the ascendant Fujiwara clan was located. It was a late efflorescence of the Kofun/Yamato Period with a high degree of political and cultural development. Buddhism was introduced c. 532 AD from China via Korea. Its status became increasingly solidified over the next two centuries, to a large degree as a tool of the state. The rise of Buddhism also caused the ancient indigenous Japanese animist folk religion to define itself and give itself a name for the first time: Shinto, 'the way of the gods'. Chinese and Korean culture had a civilizing influence on Japan - the Japanese being great imitators and the greatest refiners. The Asuka Period can be considered the beginning of the era of court-centered 'Classical Japan'. The graceful Horyu-ji Buddhist temple just outside Nara was built in 607AD and still stands today as the oldest wooden structure in the world. Political and cultural hero Prince Shotoku promulgated Japan's first constitution in 604AD, marking the advent of Japan (named NIHON, 'Source of the Sun') as a nation-state. The Taika Reforms of 646AD were a massive government-sponsored program sponsored by Emperor Kotoku designed to imitate and enhance the best of Chinese political, legal, architectural, dietary and philosophical (Confucianist) principles and practices.

710-794 AD - The **NARA PERIOD** began when a new capital was established at Nara, 45 km/28 mi south of Kyoto. Todai-ji, the world's largest wooden building, was built to house the great Buddha (*Daibutsu*) in 749 AD. Kiyomizu (Clearwater) Temple was founded in 778 in southeastern Kyoto, and in 794 the capital moved to Kyoto.

794-1185 AD - The **HEIAN PERIOD**, named after the original name of the city we now know as Kyoto, was the last period of classical, courtly Japan. Chinese influences were at their height but sophisticated refinements molded a new unique Japanese aesthetic. The Shingon ('True Word') branch of Buddhism was founded in Japan after a visit to China by the famed monk Kobo Daishi in 804AD. Likewise a competing branch known as Tendai (named after a holy mountain in China) was founded by monk Dengyo Daishi around the same time. The Emperor had figurehead status in the Heian Period but the Fujiwara clan ruled. Most Emperors had Fujiwara mothers. The magnificent Byodo-in in Uji outside of Kyoto dates from 998AD and began as a Fujiwara villa, later converted to a Jodo (Pure Land) Buddhist temple in 1180. Pure Land Buddhism, which was introduced to Japan from China near the end of the Heian Period, worships the Amida Buddha and is the largest Buddhist sect in Japan today. Shinto of course co-existed syncretically with Buddhism in ancient Japan just as it does today, and both the Fushima-Inari Shinto shrine and the Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto date back to this Heian Period. The world's first novel, The Tale of Genji written by Lady Murasaki, was written c 1000AD in this period. The Heian Period was the ultimate efflorescence of classical Japan. Yet this era of elegance would end with brutal clan wars, most notably the ferocious Genpei War, a civil war between rival Taira and Minamoto clans. The havoc ushered in by the clan wars would lead to a new feudal age that would last almost 700 years.

(As a side note for Japan cruisers: Note that the great Silla Kingdom of Korea, centered in Gyeongju north of Busan and often visited on Japan cruises, flourished from 56 BC to 935 AD.)

THE FEUDAL PERIOD 1191-1868

1191-1333 - The **KAMAKURA PERIOD** or **KAMAKURA SHOGUNATE** (named after the Shogun's home region just 20 minutes outside of Tokyo and most definitely worth a day trip) begins Japan's Feudal Period. Power was now in the hands of a military strongman dictator warlord, the Shogun. The first self-declared Shogun or Supreme Warlord was Minamoto no Yoritomo. The Emperor was now a totally powerless figurehead, a bird in a gilded cage in his palace. The Shogun's subordinate but powerful henchmen warlords were known as *daimyo* (literally 'big man') and each of these feudal barons presided over a large region and army. Culture did not take a backseat to militarism during this period. The immense and beautiful giant Kamakura Buddha (Daibutsu) was cast in 1191 AD and is still most impressive today. Zen Buddhism was introduced (morphing from Chinese *Chan* Buddhism to Korean *Seon* Buddhism to Japanese *Zen*) in the early Kamakura Period. The samurai - military retainers serving the Shogun or a daimyo - were introduced during this period and they embraced Zen, with its spare aesthetics and recognition of the fleeting nature of life. The ephemeral cherry blossoms (*sakura*) beautifully symbolize this. A samurai legal code was promulgated in 1232. The imperious and bellicose Mongols who had already conquered China tried twice, unsuccessfully, to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. Their plans were foiled more by violent storms at sea (*kami kaze*) than by Japanese military resistance. Mongol shipwrecks are being excavated today off of Nagasaki. A hilltop fort which would eventually become the imposing and iconic Himeji 'White Egret' Castle outside of Kobe dates to the late Kamakura Period.

1333-1336 The **KENMU RESTORATION** - Thanks to infighting and warring warlords - a constant theme throughout the early and mid-feudal era - a faction backing the Emperor Go-Daigo was able to topple the Shogunate in 1333 and temporarily restore imperial power. But not for long - just a brief interlude of 3 years.

1334-1573 The **MUROMACHI PERIOD** was established with the military ascent of a new dynastic Shogunate, the **ASHIKAGA SHOGUNATE**. Muromachi refers to the region outside of Kyoto where the Ashikaga Shoguns had their central government. Somewhat poetically the seat of government of any shogunate was called the *bakufu*, which means tent. This metonymic designation carries a military air which is apt. The daimyo warlord barons became richer and even more powerful during this period, leading to more and more conflict for land and supremacy. Yet despite the constant conflict, there were notable cultural advances and achievements. The original Ginkaku-ji, The Golden Pavillion in Kyoto, was built in 1460 as the Ashikaga Shogun's villa, and converted to a Zen temple after his death per his wishes. The famous Ryoan-ji Zen rock garden (dry landscape, *karesansui* in Japanese) in the same area was built in 1473 - amidst a brutal 10-year civil war of warring warlords from 1467-1477 known as The Onin War. The destructive aftermath of the Onin War would really go on for another century, a period known as the **SENGOKU PERIOD** - the period from the mid-1400s through the mid-1500s wherein warring mini-states sowed chaos and violence. This is the dramatic period depicted in Akira Kurosawa's great films including *The Seven Samurai*, *Throne of Blood*, *Yojimbo*, and the immortal *Rashomon*. Also of note is that Japan had its first contact with the *nanban* - the Southern Barbarians - in the late Sengoku Period. The *nanban* refers to Westerners, who sailed in from the southwest Pacific. The first *nanban* were a group of shipwrecked Portuguese sailors in 1542. The Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier - the 'Apostle of the East' - undertook a mission to Kyoto in 1549-50. Nagasaki would become a Jesuit colony of sorts, with a strong economic enterprise at its core as the driving force. Many more *nanban* - British, Dutch (and eventually Americans in 1853) - would follow. Out of the chaos of the Sengoku Period, a unification movement under several successive shoguns would emerge. The first was Nobunaga, who captured Kyoto in 1568 and soon overthrew the Ashikaga Shogunate and took the mantle for himself.

1573-1603 This period of unification has an unwieldy name: **THE AZUCHI-MOMOYAMA PERIOD**. Azuchi refers to a hilly area above Lake Biwa northeast of Kyoto where Nobunaga built his home castle. But Nobunaga did not last the full 30 years of this period. He was murdered by a daimyo loyal to his rival Hideyoshi, who succeeded him. Hideyoshi's home castle was in the Momoyama hills of southern Kyoto, hence the name of the period. This period might best be termed the **PERIOD OF UNIFICATION** ushered in by Nobunaga. Increasing hostility toward previously-tolerated Christians resulted in the infamous 'Martyrdom of The 26 Christians' in Nagasaki under Hideyoshi in 1597. Unification progressed under Hideyoshi. It would be completed under his successor, Tokugawa, following the momentous Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. This would usher in the last - and most enduring - shogunate: The Tokugawa Shogunate which lasted from 1604-1868. Tokugawa moved the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo (then called Edo, which means bay). For more on this colorful and important period of reunification, **see my handout on THE THREE GREAT UNIFIERS**.



Oda Nobunaga



Toyotomi Hideyoshi



Tokugawa Ieyasu

THE THREE GREAT UNIFIERS