

E. The Origin of Today's Japan (c.660 BC)

1. Japan's insular culture has pre-historic roots.
2. Japanese religion — a *national* religion called “Shinto,” or “Shintoism” — holds that the islands of Japan and the leaders of Japan are the creations of *Japanese* gods or “kami.”
3. In particular, the royal family of Japan, the Yamato family is believed to be of divine origin, with a goddess *Amaterasu* as the mother of the clan, including the first emperor, Jimmu.
4. The story of Jimmu is told in a national history called the “Nihon Shoki,” which was written about 1400 years after the events it presents, because only at that later time did the Japanese people actually have writing.
5. Historians do not accept the stories that are told about the earliest emperors as being true, but because of the importance of Japan's religion to Japan—and especially Japanese government—we will put the first anchor fact of Japanese history where the Japanese believe it goes.
6. Jimmu became the first emperor, according to Japanese tradition, **c.660 BC**.
7. The key to using this anchor fact is knowing that it is not considered an accurate event by historians, but it is so important in Japanese tradition that it is possibly *more important* to the Japanese than a true event would be.
8. What is amazing about the power of Japanese belief in the kami and the Yamato family is that the religion of Shintoism and the Yamato dynasty have been uninterrupted for the entire history of Japan. This makes the Yamato dynasty the longest-lived dynasty in the history of the world (about 2700 years!).
9. As we saw earlier, the Japanese emperor no longer has any power, according to the Japanese constitution, but the fact that there is an “emperor” mentioned at the beginning of the constitution shows us that even today — in *post-imperial* Japan — there is a belief in the divine royal family.



A famous depiction of the first emperor, Jimmu, shown with a bow and a *three-legged* crow—considered a mystical creature in Shintoism.

F. The Pattern of the Yamato Dynasty

1. In Chinese history, we saw multiple dynasties rise and fall. In that context, the main pattern to observe was the “dynastic cycle,” where benevolent rulers rise to power, and tyrants lose power and are replaced by the next set. Rinse. Repeat.

2. In Japanese history, because there is only one dynasty, it makes more sense to explore the life cycle of a dynasty itself. The history of the Yamato dynasty follows a pattern that all dynasties exhibit, but with a twist.
3. This rise to power of Jimmu begins the life cycle of a system that is referred to as “monarchy,” i.e. the “rule of one.”
4. At the top is a king, who rules for life, who belongs to the most powerful family that founds a central government for some significant area (usually not as big as the country eventually becomes). The king’s role in the founding is his unique leadership ability, his strong personality and ability to command others, which is called “charisma.” This first stage in the life-cycle of monarchy is thus a *charismatic monarchy*.
5. The king’s family is always allied to a large group of other families that see themselves as the elite of this newly governed territory. They fought along side the king’s family, and without them neither the main family nor the king could achieve or maintain themselves in power.
6. The name for this arrangement comes from ancient Greece, where the pattern also held, and where the elite families saw themselves as *the best* (the “aristos,” in Greek) and thus their rule (“kratia,” in Greek) is known as “*aristocracy*.”
7. All monarchies are in fact a form of aristocracy, with a large ruling group surrounding a single figure, who may have a lot of power (depending on how charismatic he is) or may rely almost entirely on those around him.
8. The first stage in the evolution of a monarchy is the creation of a system that outlives the first king. This happens in the most obvious way: the king chooses the next king—who almost always is his son—and gets the aristocracy to accept his choice. In the vast majority of cases, where sons inherit from their fathers, the original *charismatic monarchy* becomes a *hereditary monarchy*.
9. Over time, ruling families devise means of freeing themselves from depending on other powerful families by creating a set of independent officials, who enact government policy independent of the aristocracy. This system, called *bureaucratic monarchy*, is so named because the word “office” in French is “bureau.”
10. If a monarchy succeeds in creating a bureaucracy to support itself, and that system functions for long enough without being stopped, it eventually concentrates all power in itself, and becomes an *absolute monarchy*.
11. The Yamato dynasty exhibits all these stages over its very long history, but its evolution is not a smooth process, and its involves uniquely Japanese innovations.

G. The Soga Clan and the Rise of Confucian Bureaucracy in Japan

1. After many centuries of hereditary rule by Jimmu’s Yamato descendants, bureaucratic government began to arise in Japan under Chinese influence.
2. The promoters of this trend were the powerful family allied to the Yamato clan known as the Soga clan.

3. **C.552 AD**, the Soga clan convinced the imperial family to import elements of Chinese culture, including the Chinese writing system, Buddhism, and Confucianism, which was the core of Chinese bureaucratic monarchy.
4. If the Soga clan had managed to become the leaders of a new bureaucratic government, the other powerful aristocratic families reasoned, the Soga could dominate a powerful central government.
5. Fearing for their own power and privilege, the other clan leaders conspired to assassinate Soga no Iruka, the Soga leader, whose death led to the disintegration of the clan. The assassination is commemorated in Japanese culture as the **Isshi Incident, c.645 AD**.
6. The Yamato emperor continued with the plan for implementing Confucianism, despite the assassination, so the Soga clan's ideas triumphed, even if the clan itself was destroyed.

H. The Fujiwara Clan and the Rise of the Shogunate

1. The implementation of a bureaucratic system did not work out as intended. Seeing that the government was moving to create a new system of officials to govern the country, the major clans, who were the wealthiest landowners in Japan, conspired to control the system indirectly by controlling who could be nominated and selected for the imperial examination system whereby officials were chosen.
2. The result was a new kind of clan contest for primacy within the bureaucracy.
3. As some clans grew to a level of dominance in this system, it became inevitable that the threat they posed to the existence of other clans would result in violence.
4. The **Genpei War (c.1185)** between the most powerful clans led to the primacy of the Minamoto clan, whose leader Minamoto no Yoritomo made himself the head of a new centralized army in order to impose control on the clans. His title was "*shogun*."
5. With the shogunate in place, the history of Japan became a three-way "balance of power," with the emperor possessing divine authority, but the shogun possessing military power, and the clans penetrating the administration and having local control of the land.
6. Despite disruptions to this system, when one part of the triangle became unduly strong compared to the others temporarily, it lasted—at least until the big picture changed...

I. The Europeans Arrive and Japan Becomes Insular

1. Japan had managed to define its own culture as an island nation next to Korea and "Middle Kingdom" China. It was only with the arrival of Europeans, that Japan struggled to adapt to the presence of other people and their beliefs.
2. European merchants first arrived in Japan in **1543**, and the missionary Francis Xavier soon followed in **1549**, wanting to teach Christianity to the Japanese.
3. Buddhism, which mainly promotes mindfulness and meditation, could be combined with Shintoism in a way that did not threaten the power of the Japanese emperor, but Christianity could not. (According to Christianity, there is only one God, and any Japanese beliefs about Japanese gods are viewed as false.)

4. The key the problem for the Japanese emperor was that Christianity denied his divinity and thus threatened his unique role as the divine ruler within the Japanese system of government. If the Japanese widely accepted Christianity, they would no longer feel compelled to worship and obey him.
5. This fear was confirmed when a Japanese clan leader converted along with tens of thousands of followers, and then rebelled against the emperor in the Shimabara Rebellion of **1637**.
6. Already inclined to outlaw Christianity, the emperor ordered the shogun to eliminate the threat, and the entire Christian community was massacred. A ban on foreigners in Japan, known as the “sakoku” policy, was then implemented. (“Sakoku” means isolation in Japanese.)
7. Sakoku did not mean a total isolation, because Japan did not have to overcome a “Middle Kingdom” mindset. Japanese leaders felt that trade was beneficial, and that it could be managed, with appropriate partners. The ideal European partners in that regard were the Dutch, who believed in religious toleration and freedom. Despite sakoku, therefore, the Japanese allowed a limited trade with Netherlands, and practiced “rangaku” (Dutch learning) in addition to sakoku, in order to stay in touch with the wider world.