

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

1. Japanese religion — a *national* religion called “Shinto,” or “Shintoism” — says that the islands of Japan and the leaders of Japan are the creations of *Japanese* gods or “kami.”
2. 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 first emperor, Jimmu.
3. Jimmu became the first emperor, according to Japanese tradition, **c.660 BC**.
4. What is amazing about Japanese beliefs is that they helped the Yamato family to rule Japan for 2700 years! (That’s the longest dynasty in all of history.)
5. 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 magical creature in Shintoism.

F. The Pattern of the Yamato Dynasty

1. In Chinese history, we saw multiple dynasties rise and fall. That’s why paid close attention to the “dynastic cycle,” where benevolent rulers rise to power, and tyrants lose power.
2. In Japanese history, because there is only one dynasty, it makes more sense to explore the life cycle of a dynasty itself.
3. The rise to power of Jimmu begins the life cycle of a “monarchy,” which means: the “rule of one.”
4. At the top is a king who has “charisma”, in other words a strong personality and the ability to lead others. This king rules for life thanks to his charisma, which is called a *charismatic monarchy*.
5. A main family like Jimmu’s is always allied to a large group of other families that fought along side the king’s family, and without them neither the main family nor the king could stay in power. In Japanese history, these are the *clans*.
6. When the king chooses the next king (almost always his oldest son) and gets the most powerful clans to accept his choice his *charismatic monarchy* becomes a *hereditary monarchy*.
7. In most monarchies, ruling families try to free themselves from depending on other powerful families by creating a set of independent officials, who run the government for them and are paid well to do their jobs. This system of professionals is called

bureaucratic monarchy, which gets its name from the French word for “office,” which is “bureau.”

8. If a monarchy succeeds in creating a bureaucracy to support itself, and that system lasts, it usually gets all the power and becomes an *absolute monarchy*.
9. The Yamato dynasty went from a charismatic—to a hereditary—to a bureaucratic—to an absolute monarchy over its long history, but it was a bumpy process...

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

1. **C.552 AD**, the powerful 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.
2. If the Soga clan had managed to become the leaders of a new bureaucratic government, the other powerful aristocratic families believed that the Soga would become too powerful and might take over the country themselves.
3. Fearing for their own power and privilege, the other clan leaders killed the Soga leader, Soga no Iruka in the **Isshi Incident, c.645 AD**.
4. 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 clans could not stop the creation of a bureaucratic monarchy, so they decided to control who could be trained and nominated for the imperial examination system whereby officials were chosen.
2. The result was a new kind of clan contest for control of the bureaucracy, which eventually became a civil war between the clans.
3. The **Genpei War (c.1185)** between the most powerful clans led to the rise of the Minamoto clan, whose leader Minamoto no Yoritomo made himself the head of a new centralized army in order to control the other clans. His title was “*shogun*.”
4. With the shogun in charge of the emperor’s army, 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 controlling the land and the bureaucracy.
5. This arrangement sometimes tipped in favor of one side or another, but it basically worked and it lasted for centuries—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. According to Christianity, there is only one God, and any Japanese beliefs about Japanese gods are viewed as false. This, of course, led to religious arguments.
4. The problem about these religious arguments for the Japanese emperor was that Christianity said that the emperor was not the child of the gods. If the Japanese widely accepted Christianity, they would no longer 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. 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. Even though they wanted sakoku, the Japanese were willing to trade with the Dutch, the only Europeans who believed in religious freedom. 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.