

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

1. 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.”
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. 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.
4. Jimmu became the first emperor, according to Japanese tradition, **c.660 BC**.
5. 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!).
6. 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 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.
3. The 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 (to “found” is to start or create something). The king gets to rule because he 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 achieve or maintain themselves in power.
6. In Japanese history, the most powerful large groups of families are called "clans."
7. 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 most powerful clans to accept his choice. In the vast majority of cases, where sons inherit from their fathers, the original *charismatic monarchy* becomes a *hereditary monarchy*.
8. 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."
9. 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*.
10. 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. 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.
4. 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.
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, 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. 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 think it was the Middle Kingdom and that it didn’t really have anything to learn from others. 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.