

# Heian-kyo: The Heart of Japan's Golden Age

**Essential Question: *What was life like for aristocrats during the Heian period?***

## Introduction

The culture of medieval Japan was rich and varied due to exchanges with other Asian peoples. These exchanges enabled a unique Japanese culture to blossom between the 9th and the 12th centuries.

As you may know, Japan is close enough to the mainland of Asia to be affected by cultural ideas from that region. At the same time, the waterways separating Japan from mainland Asia helped protect the Japanese from conquest by other Asian peoples. As a result, Japan remained politically independent and had the chance to develop its own civilization.

For most of the 8th century, the city of **Nara** was the imperial capital of Japan. During this time, contact with China brought many new cultural ideas to Japan. Then, in 794, **Emperor Kammu** moved the capital to **Heian-kyo (hay-AHN-keeyo)**, an event that marked the start of the Heian period, which lasted until 1185.

The Heian period is often called Japan's golden age. During this time, **aristocrats [someone who holds a high social level]** led a great flourishing of Japanese culture. The aristocrats prized beauty, elegance, and correct manners. Over time, they developed new forms of literature and art. Poets wrote delicately about feelings and the fragile beauties of nature. Court women composed diaries and other types of nonfiction, as well as fiction. Painters and sculptors invented new styles of art. Performers entertained the court with new kinds of music, dance, and drama.

The brilliant culture of the Heian period still influences Japanese art and life. In this lesson, you will learn more about Japan's golden age. You will examine how Heian aristocrats lived and how they created new kinds of Japanese art and literature.



This scene from the *Tale of Genji* illustrates the luxurious lifestyle of the aristocrats during the Heian period.

## 1. A New Capital

During the 8th century, the Buddhist priests of Nara gained a great deal of influence over the Japanese court. In 784, **Emperor Kammu** decided to move his capital away from Nara, in part because he thought the priests' power was damaging to the government. The emperor also wanted a larger, grander city for his capital.

The first site Kammu chose was Nagaoka, about 30 miles from Nara, but the move was troubled from the beginning. As money poured in to build the new city, rumors of corruption, or dishonesty, spread.



The Phoenix Hall was one of the most beautiful structures built in the new capital city of Heian-kyo.

People said the land had been acquired through a deal with a rich Chinese family. The site also seemed to be unlucky, because the emperor's family suffered illnesses at this time. In 794, the emperor stopped work on the city and, once again, ordered that the capital be moved.

This time, Kammu chose a village on the Yodo River, a site that was both lovelier than Nagaoka and easier to defend. There, Kammu began building a new city he called **Heian-kyo**. *Kyo* means “city” in Japanese. *Heian-kyo* means, “**The Capital of Peace and Tranquility.**” This event marks the beginning of the **Heian period [the cultural flowering in Japan that took place between the late 8th and the late 12th centuries]**.

Heian-kyo, which is now the city of Kyoto, became the first truly Japanese city. As with Nara, Heian-kyo was laid out in a checkerboard pattern like the Chinese city of Chang'an. Built on a grand scale, the walled city was lovely and elegant, with wide, tree-lined streets. It was set in forested hills, amid streams, waterfalls, and lakes. Shrines and temples blended with the area's natural beauty.

Heian-kyo's crisscrossing streets were modeled after those of Chang'an, but the city's architecture was Japanese. In the center of the city were palaces and government offices. Wealthy Heian families lived in mansions surrounded by beautiful gardens with artificial lakes. The grounds of each home covered three to four acres and were enclosed by white stone walls.

Inside the mansions, large rooms were divided by screens or curtains and connected with open-air covered hallways. Simplicity was considered beautiful, so there were few objects on the wood floors other than straw mats and cushions. The Japanese did not use chairs.

In 794, the emperor Kammu moved the Japanese capital from Nara to Heiankyo. This began the Heian period, a time of rich cultural development.



Daily life was very formal, and correct manners were extremely important. For example, a Heian lady sat behind a portable screen that hid her from view while she talked and took part in life around the house. An unmarried lady would permit her suitor to see past the screen only after a romance had become serious.

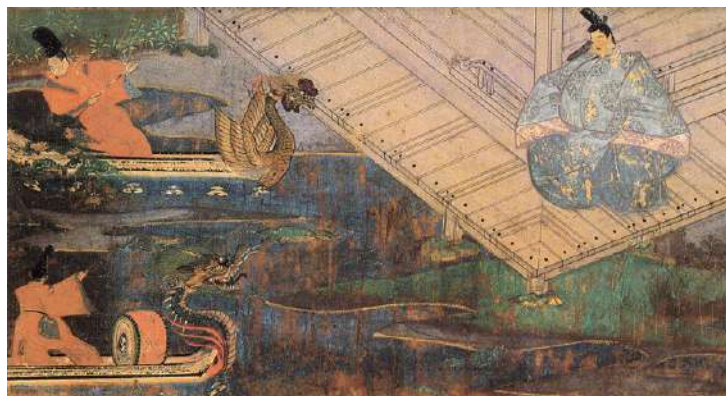
## 2. The Rise of the Fujiwara Family

During much of the Heian period, which was a **golden age [a period in a nation's past during which its culture and society attained the height of achievement]**, aristocrats were the political and cultural leaders of Japan. By the mid-9th century, the real power in the imperial court shifted from the emperor to aristocratic families. The most important of these noble families were the Fujiwara, who controlled Japan for nearly 300 years.



The **Fujiwara** were never actually rulers. The Japanese believed that the emperor's family was descended from Japan's sun goddess, giving the royal family a special right to govern. However, the Fujiwara had other ways of exercising power.

First, beginning in 858, the Fujiwara married many of their daughters into the royal family. They also made sure that sons of Fujiwara royal wives were chosen to be emperors. Second, the Fujiwara acted as advisers to the emperor, which, in reality, gave them more power than the rulers they guided. They often coaxed older emperors to retire so that a child or youth could take the throne, allowing the Fujiwara to rule as regents in the young emperor's name.



**Fujiwara Michinaga, one of the most powerful leaders during Japan's golden age, was very wealthy. In this page from the diary of Lady Murasaki, Michinaga is entertained by watching boats on a lake at his home.**

The most successful Fujiwara leader was **Fujiwara Michinaga**, who led Japan from 995 to 1028. He never had an official position in the government, but this smart, ambitious man had the respect of everyone around him. He was the father-in-law of four emperors and the grandfather of three more. He lived a life of great wealth and luxury. Michinaga rightly said, "This world, I think, is indeed my world."

Michinaga is one of the best-known figures in Japan's history. During his time in power, the Fujiwara family became even richer and built palaces, mansions, and temples. After Michinaga's death, his son built a famous temple that came to be called Phoenix Hall. It likely earned this name because it was shaped like a bird in flight. Part of the temple still stands as a gracious reminder of Japan's golden age.

The Fujiwara family used their power to better their own lives. However, they also kept peace in Japan for nearly three centuries, which helped Japanese culture blossom during the Heian period.

### 3. Social Position in the Heian Court

Rank, as determined almost completely by the position of a person's birth family, was very important during this period. Birth into a high-ranking family mattered more than personal qualities or skills.

There were **nine main ranks** in the Heian court hierarchy. High court nobles appointed by the emperor filled the top three ranks. Less important officials filled the fourth and fifth ranks. Nobles in all these ranks received profits from rice farms throughout the country, as well as money from taxes paid by peasant farmers. The sixth through the ninth ranks were filled by minor officials, clerks, and experts in such fields as law and medicine.



**Noble women in higher ranks had servants to help them with their personal needs from morning to night.**

The nine main ranks were divided into classes, such as senior and junior, upper and lower. In total, there were some 30 sub-ranks, each of which had specific privileges and detailed rules of **conduct [a person's behavior, especially in front of other people]**. Members of different ranks had different types of houses and carriages. Rank determined the number of servant's people had and even the number of folds in the fans they carried. Men of the first, second, and third ranks carried fans with

25 folds, whereas men of the fourth and fifth ranks used fans with 23 folds. The fans of those in lower ranks had only 12 folds.

This precise ranking system also determined such matters as what color clothing a noble could wear and the height of the gatepost in front of his family's home. In addition, if a person was found guilty of a crime, rank determined the harshness of the sentence.

#### 4. Beauty and Fashion During the Heian Period

Heian society prized beauty, elegance, and fashion. To be described as **yoki** (good), people had to come from an important family. They also had to look nice and be sensitive to beauty in nature, poetry, and art. Individuals were judged on whether they had good taste, and the ability to recognize beauty was valued over qualities like generosity and honesty.

Both men and women groomed themselves with great care. Small, pointed beards were considered attractive on male **courtiers [a male member of a ruler's court]**. For women, long hair was an important beauty feature. Ideally, a woman's hair would grow longer than she was tall.

The Japanese of this time considered white teeth unattractive, so both men and women carefully blackened their teeth with a dye made from iron and other ingredients soaked in tea or vinegar. Personal scent was also very **significant [having meaning and importance]**, so both men and women wore perfume. Perfume competitions were frequent and popular, and people guarded their perfume recipes carefully.

For women, **makeup** was also important. Women used white face powder to make themselves look very pale. Over the chalky powder, a Heian woman put touches of red on her cheeks and then painted on a small red mouth. She also plucked out her eyebrows and painted on a set in just the right spot on her forehead.

A woman's clothing needed to be ornate and beautiful. An aristocratic woman might wear as many as 12 silk underrobes at one time. When she rode in a carriage, she might dangle a wrist so that people in the street would notice the lovely layers of colored silk.

The love of beauty also showed in Heian architecture, calligraphy, poetry, and artwork. Concern with form and beauty was so great that courtiers sometimes had to perform stylized dances as part of their official duties.

#### 5. Entertainment at the Heian Court

Heian-kyo's aristocrats had plenty of leisure time for sporting events, games, and contests. Men enjoyed watching horse races, archery contests, and sumo wrestling. In sumo wrestling, which remains very popular in Japan, men of great weight try to throw each other to the ground or out of the ring. When the weather was warm, men and women alike enjoyed watching boat races along the river that flowed through the city.

Groups of courtiers played a game called **kemari**, in which they kicked a leather ball back and forth, keeping it in the air for as long as possible. They played in the same elegant robes they wore at court.



Long hair, eyebrows painted high on the forehead, and bright red lips were signs of beauty during the Heian period, and multiple layers of brightly colored silk robes reflected a woman's status.



Women used the stone pieces of the popular board game Go to play a game called **rango**, the object of which was to balance as many stones as possible on one finger.

Each of the many festivals and celebrations on the Heian calendar had its own customs. Many involved contests that tested athletic, poetic, or artistic skill. For example, in the Festival of the Snake, cups were floated in a stream. Guests took a cup, drank from it, and then had to compose and recite a poem. Other special days featured contests that judged the best-decorated fans, the most fragrant perfumes, the loveliest artwork, or the most graceful dancing.

Dancing was an important skill for Heian-kyo's nobles because dance was part of nearly every festival. **Bugaku** (boo-GAH-koo) performances, which combined dance with music and drama, were a popular form of entertainment. Bugaku dancers wore masks and acted out a simple story using memorized movements.



**Bugaku performances combine dance with music and drama. This traditional Japanese dance style started in the Heian period and continues to be performed today.**

## 6. Sculpture and Painting During the Heian Period

During the Heian period, many artists continued to be influenced by Chinese art. Gradually, however, sculptors and painters created their own Japanese styles.

Early Heian sculptors commonly made an entire work from a single piece of wood. Later in this period, sculptors made statues by carving separate pieces from carefully selected wood and then joining them. With the help of assistants, sculptors could make the separate parts in large quantities, enabling them to create a group of similar statues quickly and precisely.

**Jocho**, an artist who worked for Fujiwara Michinaga, probably developed this technique.

Jocho made perhaps the greatest masterpiece of Heian sculpture, the Amida Buddha. This beautifully carved Buddha, “The Lord of Boundless Light,” expresses a sense of deep peace and strength.

In painting, Heian artists consciously developed a Japanese style, which they called **yamato-e**, or “Japanese painting.” Painters drew their scenes with thin lines and then filled them in with bright colors. Lines were made quickly to suggest movement, but they were drawn more deliberately in restful scenes.

At first, artists used the new style to paint Buddhist subjects, but over time they focused on nonreligious scenes. There were four main types of yamato-e: landscapes showing the four seasons, places of natural beauty, people doing seasonal tasks, and scenes from literature (called “story paintings”).



**The sculptor Jocho developed the technique called yosegi-zukuri, in which blocks of wood were hollowed out, carved, and then assembled. This Amida Buddha is a replica of Jocho's work.**

The new style of painting was used to decorate walls, screens, and the sliding doors of houses and temples. Some of the most famous examples of **yamato-e**, however, are scroll paintings. A scroll painting shows a series of scenes from right to left so that viewers see events chronologically as they

unroll the scroll. Scroll painting had been invented in China, but Heian painters added their own distinctive touches. For example, they often showed scenes inside buildings from above, as if the viewer were peering down through an invisible roof.

## 7. Writing and Literature During the Heian Period

Writing was the most valued form of expression in Heian Japan. Everyone was expected to show skill in using words well. Early Heian writers composed artful poems in Chinese, but as time passed, distinctly Japanese ways of writing developed both in daily life and in the creation of works of literature.

**Writing in Daily Life:** Poetry was part of daily life in Heian-kyo, and people were expected to compose poetry in public. If they could not think up a few clever lines to fit an occasion, others noticed the failure. Men and women carefully created poems to charm each other. When someone received a poem from a friend, family member, or acquaintance, he or she was expected to write one in response. The responding poem was supposed to be written in the same style and mood, and have the same imagery, as the original.

In earlier times, the Japanese had used **kana**, which was based on simplified Chinese characters, to write the syllables of their language. In Heian times, there were two ways of writing, much like we have cursive and print letters in English. One, **katakana**, was more formal. Men used katakana when they wrote anything important. The second form of writing was **hiragana**. Characters in hiragana are formed with simple strokes that make writing and reading easier and faster. Hiragana was mostly seen as “**women's writing**.” Court women favored hiragana for personal writing, such as diaries, and some of them used it to create lasting works of literature. Over time, hiragana took its place alongside katakana as part of Japan's written language.

Heian writers took care to present their work in a beautiful manner, since calligraphy skills were viewed as important as the ability to create poetry. People believed that handwriting revealed their character and goodness better than the words they used. Calligraphy was often displayed on colorful, handmade paper, and sometimes the paper was even perfumed.

**Women Become Japan's Leading Writers:** The female companions to the courtiers of Heian-kyo were usually selected for their intelligence. They often took a great interest in literature, and as a result, women led in the flowering of Japanese literature in the golden age of the 10th and 11th centuries.

The best-known Heian writer was Murasaki Shikibu, often referred to as **Lady Murasaki**. Born into the Fujiwara family, she served as a lady-in-waiting to one of the daughters of Fujiwara Michinaga. Her novel, the ***Tale of Genji*** [a Japanese novel and Heian masterpiece written by Murasaki



This is a statue of Murasaki Shikibu, a leading writer during the Heian period, in Kyoto. She wrote the *Tale of Genji*, considered by many to be the world's first novel.



The *Tale of Genji* describes the life of Japanese nobles during the Heian period. This is an illustration of a scene from a 19th-century version of the novel.



**Shikibu; considered one of the great works of world literature]** (GEN-jee), is a Heian masterpiece and is today considered one of the great works of world literature.

The ***Tale of Genji*** is often called the world's first novel. The book follows the life of Genji, a fictional prince, and paints a vivid picture of life in the Heian court. Much of the book focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the characters, particularly the women. For this reason, the *Tale of Genji* has served as a model for the modern romance novel.

Murasaki also kept a diary about her life in the court. Like her novel, her diary offers a close look at court life in the period.

The other leading writer of the time was **Sei Shonagon**. Like the *Tale of Genji*, Shonagon's ***Pillow Book*** presents a detailed picture of life in Heian-kyo. *Pillow Book* is a collection of clever stories, character sketches, conversations, descriptions of art and nature, and various lists. Here is Shonagon's list of "Things That Should Be Short":

**a piece of thread when one wants to sew something in a hurry**  
**a lamp stand**  
**the hair of a woman of the lower classes**  
**the speech of a young girl**

Like Sei Shonagon, many Heian women wrote their thoughts and experiences in diaries. A book called ***The Gossamer Years*** is the earliest existing example. This diary by an unknown noblewoman describes her unhappy life as companion to a Fujiwara leader. Writers often included artwork, poems, and letters in their diary entries.

## **8. The End of the Heian Period**

The Heian period is known as Japan's golden age of peace. However, despite the glittering imperial court, problems were brewing that would bring an end to this flourishing cultural era.

Aristocrats in Heian-kyo lived very well, but in Japan's rural areas most people were quite poor. The peasants' farming and other work supported Heian-kyo's rich. Even so, the wealthy looked down on the poor and ignored their problems.

While the rich focused on culture in Heian-kyo, events in the countryside began to weaken the Heian court. The practice of giving large estates to top nobles slowly **eroded [to slowly break down or destroy]** the emperors' power. Those who owned these estates paid no taxes. Eventually, tax-free land was so common that the government could no longer collect enough taxes to support the emperor.

Japan's rulers began to lose control. Bandits roamed the countryside, and people of different religions began to band together to attack and rob one another. The government was now too weak to provide law enforcement, so estate owners created their own police forces and armies to protect their lands. The profits from landowners' estates went to paying the warriors instead of supporting the emperor.

By the 12th century, the power of some local lords rivaled that of the weakened imperial government. Fighting broke out over control of the land, while various clans struggled for power in the capital. By 1180, there was civil war in Japan.



**Minamoto Yoritomo's rise to power in 1185 marked the end of the Heian period and the beginning of military control of Japan.**

In 1185, **Minamoto Yoritomo (meen-ah-MOE-toe yor-ee-TOE-moe)**, the head of a military family, seized power. A new era began in which military leaders-controlled Japan.

## 9. The Effect of the Heian Period on Japan Today

As you have learned, the Heian period witnessed the birth of a unique Japanese culture, and the effects of this cultural flowering are still felt today. In fact, much of Japan's culture has remained quite constant since the Heian period, which can be seen most clearly in Japan's literature and drama.

Heian authors influenced many later Japanese writers. The *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon are classics that are as basic to Japanese culture as Shakespeare's works are to the English-speaking world.

The success of these writers had a major effect on Japan's written language. Today, Japanese people write with the same characters used in the *Tale of Genji*.

Heian influence is also seen in modern poetry. The short poems called *tanka* were very popular in Heian times, and this type of poetry remains a vibrant part of Japanese literature.

Modern Japanese drama also shows Heian influences. As you may recall, the *bugaku* performances of Heian times blended dance and drama. *Bugaku* led to Japan's unique Noh theater. In Noh dramas, a chorus sings a heroic story as performers dance and act it out. Noh theater is centuries old, but it is still a popular form of entertainment in Japan.

## Lesson Summary

**In this lesson, you learned about the golden age of Japanese culture, called the Heian period.**

**A New Capital and the Fujiwara Family** In 794, the emperor Kammu built a new Japanese capital, Heian-kyo, marking the beginning of the Heian period. Aristocrats—especially the Fujiwara family—dominated the new imperial court and helped to create a uniquely Japanese culture.

**Social Position, Beauty and Fashion, and Entertainment** Born into a particular social rank, the aristocrats of Heian-kyo lived in great luxury. They prized beauty, elegance, and correct manners.

**Sculpture, Painting, Writing, and Literature** Heian artists created new Japanese forms of sculpture and painting. Court women, such as Lady Murasaki, wrote classic works of Japanese literature.

**The End of the Heian Period and Its Effects** The Heian period ended in civil war and the rise of new military leaders. However, the effects of this golden age are still felt in Japan today. Japan's culture has remained fairly constant since the Heian period, especially in literature and drama.

