



# A HISTORY OF JAPAN

FROM STONE AGE TO SUPERPOWER

Third Edition

Kenneth Henshall



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## **A History of Japan**

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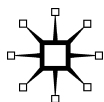
# A HISTORY OF JAPAN: FROM STONE AGE TO SUPERPOWER

3rd Edition

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# PREFACE

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## Aims and Sources

The main aim of this book is to tell the story of Japan. The story needs to be told from the beginning. It needs to be told in a balanced and comprehensive way but without becoming cluttered, and in a way that makes Japan's history accessible and understandable without becoming simplistic or superficial. Many books on Japan's history are encyclopedic in nature and have so much detail it becomes difficult to see overall trends. Others tend to focus narrowly on a theme and omit background important for a balanced perspective. Still others tend to start Japan's story in modern times, omitting important earlier background.

Such books all have their merits, but they do tend to daunt the non-specialist. In this day and age, when so many people are interested in Japan and particularly its rise to superpower status, this seems a pity. General readers, students, and scholars in other specialist fields should all have easier access to Japan's fascinating and instructive history.

Accessibility, therefore, has been a major consideration in the writing of this book. A related consideration has been to encourage readers to follow up particular points of interest to them. For these reasons I have deliberately confined my sources to those in the English language, and I have deliberately and very frequently given references with a view to readers following these up if they wish. They will not have to read Japanese to do so.

My own knowledge of Japan's history has been built up over many years from both Japanese and English sources, but not everyone can afford to spend ten years or so learning to read Japanese. When I started studying Japanese, some thirty years ago, an inability to read the script was a major barrier to acquiring any sort of authoritative knowledge of the country. This is no longer so. Nowadays there is a vast amount of material available in English, not only works written originally in English

but translations of just about every major Japanese work. As a result, it is perfectly possible for the English-language reader to gain a very informed understanding even of detailed matters about Japan. Part of my aim in this book is to draw the attention of a wider reading public to this wealth of available material. In fact, there is so much available that I simply cannot touch upon all of it.

Japan's story is a fascinating one. It has elements of adventure, of mystery and intrigue, and of controversy, and I include these in the story in these pages. It is important for all readers, even if they are not academics, to know what areas and events in Japan's history are still unclear and uncertain.

Many readers will be particularly interested in how Japan became a superpower. Japan's achievements are the result of both circumstance itself and Japan's response to circumstance, a response-pattern often based on deep-rooted values and practices. I do not let these values and practices dominate my account of Japan's history, but I do highlight them and list them in the review at the end of each part, as well as writing my conclusion around them.

The periodic reviews are intended to help accessibility. Japan's history is so long and rich that it is important to stop from time to time and look back, to try to pick out major trends and events. The more we can digest of Japan's history, the greater our reward, for it is a history well worth knowing.

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I am particularly indebted to Ken Coates, formerly Professor of History at the University of Waikato, for his insightful comments and valuable suggestions about the book as a whole. A number of other scholars and individuals around the world have commented on drafts of various sections of this book or advised on specific points, and I am grateful to them for their advice. They include Laurie Barber, Gina Barnes, Darrin Findlay, Steven Lim, Derek Massarella, Tsutomu Nishigaki, Yoshio Okamoto, Ian Pool, Ray Richards, Eric Thompson, Tadashi Uda, and Brian Whitley. The shortcomings of the final product are in no way a reflection of their advice. Nor are any conclusions drawn or views asserted necessarily a reflection of their own positions.

I am grateful to my colleague Roy Starrs for letting me have a preview manuscript of his forthcoming book on modernism and Japanese culture. I am also grateful to the staff at Palgrave Macmillan – especially Tim Farmiloe, Vicki Johnson, Aruna Vasudevan, Luciana O’Flaherty, Michael Strang, and Ruth Ireland – for their guidance and support; to the University of Waikato and the University of Canterbury for funding various overseas study trips, allowing me leave, and for buying so many books for me; and to my family and colleagues for their understanding.

I am indebted to Addisu Mesfin for politely pointing out to me that the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 was not in fact the first victory in modern times of a non-western nation over a western nation. Addisu is quite right, and I was guilty of following the herd in assuming that the defeat of Russia by Japan was the first such victory. Ethiopia defeated Italy in 1896 in the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–96), the decisive event being the Battle of Adwa (Adowa). Moreover, prompted to do further research, I discovered another victory of a non-western nation over a western nation in early-modern times, in the form of the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839–42.

Similarly I am grateful to João Bispo for suggesting I should include some discussion about manga, video games, youth culture, and Japan as a cultural superpower. As it happens, I have been planning for some time to do so in the third edition, and have now done so.

Such constructive feedback from readers is much appreciated.

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# PREFACE TO THIRD EDITION

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Subsequent to the appearance of the second edition in 2004 there have been a number of new developments in Japan, together with new scholarship related to events in its earlier history.

Recent developments include official recognition in 2008 of the Ainu as indigenous people; the toppling of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2009 by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ); the recovery of the economy, despite a setback in the world recession of 2008–09 and a substantial amount of public debt; the rapid – indeed annual – turnover of prime ministers, with there being six incumbents to October 2011 since Koizumi resigned in September 2006; the controversial deployment of Self-Defence Force personnel to Somalia in 2009; and, of course, the enormous catastrophe of 11 March 2011 in the form of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, compounded by leakage of radioactive material from damaged nuclear reactors.

Recent scholarship has also revealed new information about earlier events. For example, genetic research has cast interesting light on the origins of the Japanese; more details are emerging about links between Korea and early Japan; marine archaeology has literally uncovered a major factor in the destruction of Kublai Khan's invasion fleet of 1281; there has been more evidence to suggest that the famed samurai were not actually characterised by fighting to the death, and so on.

Structurally, I have expanded the last section of Part Six (second edition), '6.5: A superpower Adrift' into a Part Seven, which itself is divided into three sections, namely the economy, the political scene, and general life and society in global age Japan.

I have introduced a lot more statistics in Part Seven, as I believe it is important in this global age to get a 'snapshot', as it were, of quantifiable

data regarding social composition, population trends, and so forth. In particular, I have referred to a number of international indexes, such as those relating to quality of life, transparency of government, and so on. This gives us some idea of Japan's standing in the international community.

On a personal note, I am flattered and delighted that my humble book on Japanese history is going into a third edition. It has also been translated into a wide range of languages, from Chinese to Estonian – though curiously there is not a Japanese translation that I am aware of – and has been recommended as a university text as well as for the general reader. I am grateful to the translators, and for all the positive comments, which fortunately greatly outweigh the negative ones.

Finally, I wish the Japanese nation a speedy recovery from the 11 March 2011 disaster, though 'speedy' will be measured in years, and I grieve with them for the loss of life, and the loss of homes and treasured items that all form part of the lives of the survivors. It is hard to imagine the terror of such an event – pictures are not enough, you have to experience it. Here in Christchurch we have experienced two major devastating earthquakes (4 September 2010 and 22 February 2011) in less than six months, in the second of which my son barely escaped from a falling ceiling in a large building. To pass crushed corpses when seeking your son is not what any parent wants to do. And yet, such an experience is lightweight compared to the suffering in Japan.

Ken Henshall  
Christchurch, New Zealand  
October 2011

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# INTRODUCTION: JAPAN AND HISTORY

The impact Japan has had on the modern world is enormous. It occupies less than one-three-hundredth of the planet's land area, yet at the height of its economic growth in the 1980s it wielded one-sixth of the planet's economic might, and remains the third ranking economy in the world. There will be few homes and offices that do not rely on at least some Japanese technology. Japanese cars rule the roads. Despite recent problems with so-called 'Japanese-style management', many western and Asian managers still try to do things 'the Japanese way'. Japanese foreign aid props up many a developing country's economy. Project developers around the world seek Japanese investment. Tourist operators target the large numbers of wealthy Japanese who now travel overseas. Japan itself features as one of the most popular of all 'places I would like to visit' in western surveys. The list goes on.

A leading player on the world scene, Japan's absence from any major international forum would be unthinkable. No modern history of the world could fail to give it very considerable space.

And yet, of all the nations on the planet, Japan has come closest to annihilation. It is the only nation ever to have suffered nuclear attack. Many among its enemies in the Second World War genuinely believed the extermination of the Japanese race was necessary for the safety of humankind. Even humanitarians like Franklin Roosevelt seemed to think 'ethnic cleansing' might be beneficial all round.

In the end, the Japanese survived. Far from being annihilated, Japan is one of the most powerful nations on earth. Far from being forced into inter-ethnic breeding, the Japanese remain ethnically one of the most homogeneous of all populations.



Japan's arrival in the world arena has been dramatic. From a quaint and obscure land of paddy fields and feudal despots just a hundred and fifty years ago, it rapidly became a major contender among the imperialist powers, a military threat to the world order, and then, its crisis passed, an economic superpower. For many westerners, exotic and patronising nineteenth-century images of coolie-hatted rice farmers, doll-like geisha and funny little men trying to look civilised gave way to brutal warlords and fanatical samurai soldiers mindlessly loyal to an evil emperor. After the war the images changed again to slave-like workers controlled by ruthless capitalists out to dominate the world – and who succeeded in doing so. For many Asians, especially Chinese and Koreans, the one-time 'land of dwarfs' ceased to be a backward pupil. The pupil became a harsh master, and a vicious and exploitative one at that. Though they respect Japan's inspirational economic achievements, many Asians have still not forgiven Japan for its prewar and wartime behaviour in their lands.

Not all images have been negative. Among westerners, at the start of the twentieth century Japan was respected for its military victories over China and Russia and was considered an ally by some powers. After its defeat in the Second World War, it was admired for the way it set about the task of rebuilding the nation. The 'economic miracle' that soon followed was an object for analysis, and would-be imitators looked for the key to success in its educational system, its political organisation, and particularly its management practices. Among Asians, alongside the wartime images of rape and pillage and murder there is also a grudging recognition that Japan has at least put Asia on the map in terms of world respect, and overturned western condescension. Many Asian nations have openly tried to model their economies on Japan's, despite a few pitfalls. Some, notably Malaysia, have positively sung its praises.

Even though Japan at the turn of the millennium fell from grace a little as a result of its economic recession and holes in its management practices, it is still clear that the current prevailing image of Japan, and its impact on the world, is largely economic in nature – though in recent years it can also claim to be a technological and cultural superpower. In fact, Japan's focus on economic growth at the expense of quality of life and other matters has been one of the major criticisms levelled at it. At least an image of economic obsession is better than one of military fanaticism.

To understand the makings of an economic superpower it is not enough just to examine its economic development. Certainly this is

important, and is dealt with in some detail in these pages. However, Japan's postwar drive to achieve economic supremacy cannot be separated from its prewar drive to achieve military supremacy – nor from its nineteenth-century drive to modernise and become a world imperialist power, nor even from its grand ambitions of the seventh century to be taken seriously as a civilised nation. It is vital to consider the historical progress of the nation in broad terms.

The progression through history of any nation owes much to chance and circumstance. In Japan's case, it was largely a matter of luck that the ancient Chinese and Koreans did not take Japan seriously enough to make a concerted effort to occupy it, or that the Mongols did not do a better job of their botched invasions in the thirteenth century. The Japanese were fortunate again that in the sixteenth century the European powers of the day were more interested in exploiting the New World than Japan, thanks to a chance discovery by Columbus. Similarly, western powers of the nineteenth century were more interested in carving up China than bothering about Japan. And if America had decided to be more punitive and less constructive after the war, Japan would have been powerless to prevent it. At any of these turning points fortune could have turned against Japan instead of for it, and produced a different history.

But a nation's historical development also owes much to the way in which it responds to circumstance – how it makes the most of opportunities and in a sense makes its own luck. These patterns of response, at least in Japan's case, are based on values and practices that often have deep roots in its history. It is impossible to understand fully Japan's emergence as a modern superpower without some understanding of these. It is important to start at the beginning, tracing Japan's development, and noting these continuities as they emerge and recur.

Along the way lie a number of probable surprises. For example, Japan has the oldest pottery vessels yet discovered anywhere in the world. On the other hand, despite its association with rice, it was the latest of all Asian nations to cultivate it. The medieval samurai was typically quite unlike his modern idealised image of a loyal warrior who fought to the death for his lord. In the eighteenth century Japan had the world's largest city, and the world's most literate population. In the nineteenth century, Japan was not just following the west, as popularly believed, but busily resurrecting practices from its ancient past. In the twentieth century, Pearl Harbor was not the first Japanese strike in the Pacific War, nor was America the first western victim. Moreover, America had plans to strike Japan first. And for all his

massive impact during the Occupation, it was not really MacArthur who designed postwar Japan but little-known planners in Washington's State Department, particularly Hugh Borton.

There are also mysteries and controversies. Who exactly were the Yayoi invaders of more than 2,000 years ago? Where did they come from? How many came? Why did they come? Who was the mysterious Queen Himiko of the third century, and where was her realm of Yamatai located? Was it the same as the later Yamato, from which modern-day Japan derives? Why did the Japanese furiously adopt firearms after they were introduced by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, but not bother to do so when the Mongols introduced them three centuries earlier? In more recent times, just how much of a surprise was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor? How close was Japan to developing its own atom bomb? How guilty was Hirohito?

Japan's history is many things. It is an adventure story, fascinating reading even just as a simple chronicle of events. It is a mystery story, with intriguing questions yet to be fully answered. And it is a textbook, with many lessons – both dos and don'ts – for the Japanese themselves and for the world at large.

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## PART ONE

# FROM THE STONE AGE TO STATEHOOD: MYTHS, PREHISTORY, AND ANCIENT HISTORY (TO 710)

### 1.1 Making Gods of Emperors: Ancient History According to Japan's Myths

In Takamagahara (the Plain of High Heaven) a number of deities have come into existence. Below lies a swirling mass of liquid. Two of the deities, Izanagi ('He Who Invites') and Izanami ('She Who Invites'), are sent to turn this liquid into land. Izanagi dips his spear into the liquid and the drops that fall coagulate into the island of Onogoro ('Self-Curdling' Island). The two deities descend to populate it.

Numerous divine offspring are produced, not only by vaginal birth but from other bodily parts and even from bodily waste. The God of Fire, alas, is one deity born vaginally, and Izanami is burned to death as she gives birth.

Her distraught husband Izanagi travels to Yomi, the Land of the Dead, to try to bring her back to the Land of the Living. However, she is shamed and angered when he sees her maggot-riddled body, and she chases him out of Yomi. As he bathes himself in a river to wash away the pollution of death, deities emerge from his clothes and eyes and nose. They include the Sun Goddess Amaterasu ('Light of Heaven') and the Storm/Sea God Susano-o ('Wild Male').

Izanagi sends Amaterasu to Takamagahara to rule over the heavens, while Susano-o is given the sea to rule. The wayward Susano-o, however, disobeys his father, who banishes him.

Before heading into exile Susano-o visits his sister Amaterasu in Takamagahara. At his suggestion they produce a number of children, but quarrel over his motives. Susano-o then torments his sister. He destroys the ridges between her rice-paddies, smears excrement on the walls of her palace, and throws a flayed pony through the roof of her weaving-shed. Amaterasu retreats into a cave, plunging the universe into darkness.

The other deities try to lure her back out. They hang a mirror and jewelled necklace in a tree. One goddess then performs a lewd dance, exposing herself and making all the other deities laugh uproariously. Intrigued by the laughter Amaterasu peeps out from the cave, sees the jewels and mirror, and comes out to inspect them. The deities seize her and block up the entrance to the cave with a boulder. Susano-o has his banishment enforced.

He goes to Izumo (Shimane Prefecture), where he has various adventures. On one occasion he slays a monster that has been devouring children. In one of its eight tails he finds a sword, which he later presents to his sister Amaterasu as a token of remorse.

The sword, mirror, and jewels still form the imperial regalia of Japan.

Susano-o's son, Okuninushi, is credited with pacifying the wild land. A hero, he becomes the victim of numerous treacherous acts by his jealous brothers and even by his father Susano-o. They murder him several times, but he is restored to life each time.

Okuninushi's sons agree to a request from Amaterasu to let her descendants rule the land. Her great-great grandson, Jimmu, becomes the first ruler of Japan.

Japan's ancient myths were first recorded in the late seventh century, eventually appearing as the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Things) in 712 and the *Nihongi* or *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicle[s] of Japan) in 720. They were initiated by Emperor Temmu (r.673–86), who wanted to legitimise the supremacy of the imperial family by giving it divine origins.

Given this aim, it is curious that no real distinction is made between deity and mortal, either behaviourally, morally, or in terms of creation. Apart from a few unexplained references to mysterious aboriginals,<sup>1</sup> the people of the myths seem to be earth-born descendants of gods or demigods, meaning that almost all Japanese could claim divine descent. At least the imperial family could claim descent from the *supreme* deity, Amaterasu, and not the fallen deity Susano-o.

The chronicles are obviously unreliable as records of historical fact.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, to the cautious observer they still provide a valuable means of understanding Japan's ancient past.

In broad terms, they reveal a clash between the imperial family (represented by Amaterasu's line) and a rival family based in Izumo (represented by Susano-o's line), which ended with the supremacy of the imperial family being 'agreed to'. This is almost certainly a reflection of real events. However, the political slant of the accounts plays down the importance of Izumo. A dramatic hint of its actual threat as a rival power-base was revealed in 1984 with the discovery there of a cache of 358 bronze swords dating back around two thousand years. This was more than the total number of ancient swords found anywhere else in Japan.

The unusual and specific nature of many of the events in the myths, such as the incident with the flayed pony, also strongly suggests actual persons and occurrences. Such incidents provide an interesting commentary on life in ancient Japan – a world of violence and sudden death, a world where brutality and raw emotion prevail over finer feelings, and where parents kill or abandon their children and brother slays brother.

Cruelty seems to have been commonplace. On one occasion Okuninushi's brothers split open a tree, keep it open with a wedge, force him into the opening, and then remove the wedge, crushing him to death. Out of sheer malice the same brothers also trick a live skinned rabbit into bathing in saltwater and then lying in the wind, to suffer torment when its body blisters. Another episode describes a prince killing his elder brother – in the sneakiest of ways, when his victim is in the toilet – and then pulling off his limbs and throwing them away.<sup>3</sup>

Such cruel acts are not unknown in myths and early histories elsewhere in the world. But what is quite distinctive about the Japanese myths is an avoidance of moral judgement as to good and evil. Certain acts bring censure and punishment, but no moral sermonising. For example, Susano-o is simply removed as disruptive rather than condemned as evil. Gods and their earth-born descendants are as good and as bad as each other. Behaviour is accepted or rejected depending on the situation, not according to any obvious set of universal principles. This is exactly what many commentators remark upon in present-day Japanese behaviour. The roots of such behaviour clearly run deep.

## **1.2 The Earliest Inhabitants (to ca 13,000 BC)**

No-one is quite sure when the first humans appeared in Japan. Claims have been made for a date as far back as 500,000 years, and some even expect a history of a million years to be proven in due course. The

general agreement at present allows for around 200,000 years, though the earliest definite human fossil remains are only about 30,000 years old.<sup>4</sup>

Until the end of the last glacial period, around 13,000 years ago, Japan was joined to the Asian mainland by a number of land bridges. These were through Sakhalin to the north, Tsushima to the west, and the Ryūkyū Islands to the south. In other words, migration into the area was not difficult. Immigrants arrived in waves, particularly from east and southeast Asia some 30,000 years ago, followed by people from northeast Asia about 14,000 years ago.<sup>5</sup>

It is hard to paint a picture of Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) life with any certainty. One major difficulty is that much of the coastline of that time is now deep under water. There may have been far more coastal activity than the surviving inland sites suggest.

The picture emerging so far is basically one of small and seasonally mobile groups of hunter-gatherers. The hunters targeted not only boar and deer but also big game such as elephant and bison, though these were becoming scarcer in the last Palaeolithic phase owing to climatic warming and increased hunting by a growing population. Gatherers searched for a variety of berries and nuts such as hazel.

Palaeolithic groups were made up of a small number of extended families, and totalled between 20 and 150 individuals. Extended families were important for the rearing of children, since many parents were dead before their thirties, and there were many orphaned children needing the protection of the longer-lived among the adults.<sup>6</sup> Although the population was growing it probably never exceeded 20,000.

As nomadic hunter-gatherers most groups had only temporary seasonal bases. However, there was some – though limited – stable settlement towards the end of the period. There was also a degree of specialisation, which led to trading. As early as 20,000 years ago obsidian (volcanic glass valued for toolmaking) was traded over at least 150 km. This was almost certainly carried by water, indicating that watercraft were in use from very early times.

Stone Age people are popularly portrayed as cave dwellers. However, at least in the case of Japan, caves seem only rarely to have been used as sites of significant permanent occupation – though quite a large number of caves were used as temporary shelters. The preference for open space sites suggests the widespread use of artificial shelter, though the nature of this is unclear.

Important Palaeolithic sites include Babadan and Takamori in Miyagi Prefecture, Hoshino in Tochigi Prefecture, Fukui Cave in Nagasaki

Prefecture, Nogawa near Chōfu in Tōkyō Prefecture, Iwajuku in Gunma Prefecture, and Minatogawa in Okinawa. Judging by a 155 cm male skeleton excavated at Minatogawa and estimated to be around 17,000 years old, Palaeolithic people in Japan appear to have been small by modern standards but similar to other Palaeolithic peoples elsewhere in east Asia.

Knowledge of Japan's prehistoric past was hampered till after the Second World War by the tendency of Japanese archaeologists to interpret their finds in line with the pseudo-historical accounts in early chronicles such as the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*.<sup>7</sup> Knowledge of the period is now increasing but much still remains to be discovered. It is still not even clear whether the first inhabitants were *homo sapiens* or the earlier *homo erectus*.

### 1.3 Stone Age Hunters and Gatherers: The Jōmon Period (ca 13,000 BC–ca 400 BC)

Around 13,000 BC pottery vessels appeared in Japan. They are the oldest in the world.<sup>8</sup> They also mark the beginning of the Jōmon period, named after the *jōmon* (cord-pattern) found impressed on much of that pottery.

Pottery vessels might suggest a settled life-style. Settlement did increase during the period, especially from around 5000 BC. Groups also expanded into larger tribal communities. The largest Jōmon village yet discovered, at Sannai-Maruyama in Aomori Prefecture, thrived for about 1,500 years between 3500 BC and 2000 BC. It covered almost 100 acres and may have had as many as 500 inhabitants at its peak. It is even seen by some as suggesting that Japan could have been a cradle of early civilisation.<sup>9</sup>

Settlement is also associated with agriculture. Primitive slash-and-burn agriculture may have been practised in the west of the country as early as 5700 BC.<sup>10</sup> The remains of what appears to be a prehistoric farming community were unearthed in 1997 at Bibi in Hokkaidō.<sup>11</sup> Dating back to around 4000 BC, this is the oldest evidence of real farming in Japan. Rice was introduced into the southwest of the country from the continent towards the end of the period, around 1000 BC,<sup>12</sup> along with millet and barley, but was not widely grown. When it was, it was in dry-fields or marshes rather than paddies. Prior to these introduced plants the most important cultivated plants were probably the beefsteak herb and barnyard grass.

However, despite the pottery and the occasional evidence of farming, the life of the Jōmon people was for the most part one of hunting and gathering, particularly on the coast. Settlements were typically of a



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