Prehistoric Japan: Jomon and Yayoi culture

- Jomon peoples – Neolithic; earliest known inhabitants of Japan (from ca 10,000 B.C.E. to 300 B.C.E.); aka the Ainu
- Yayoi – new culture (300 B.C.E.-300 C.E.) that develops, first on Kyushu, then on Honshu
- *uji* (clan) – each was ruled by a hereditary chieftan
Amaterasu, the sun goddess

- According to the *Kojiki* (aka *Record of Ancient Matters*, 712 CE), Amaterasu was born when the god Izanagi used water to purify his left eye after failing to retrieve his sister and spouse Izanami from the Underworld.

- Traditionally, in the Shinto religion, the Japanese claim that the emperor is a descendent of the sun-goddess.

- In this telling, Jimmu was the first emperor.
Prince Shotoku Taishi, aka Umayado (572-622 C.E.)

- Leading aristocrat in one of the clans of the Yamato region (around Osaka)
- Appointed regent by the Empress Suiko during the Azuka period (538-710 C.E.)
- The epitome of the wise ruler
- In diplomatic contact with Chinese Sui emperor Yangdi (such that the influence of the Paekche kingdom in Korea on Japan diminishes)
- Buddhist scholar and protector
- Established a system of 12 official ranks and a 17-article constitution (604 C.E.) inspired by Buddhism and Confucianism
The 17-article Constitution (604 C.E.)

- Information about it is found in the *Nihon Shoki* (720 C.E.)
- Called for the creation of a centralized government and a merit system for selecting and ranking public officials
- In many ways more of a collection of moral precepts than a constitution in the modern sense: see e.g. the start of Article 1: “Harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided;” or Art. 2: “Sincerely revere the three treasures, which are the Buddha, His Law, and His Priesthood”
Taika Reform Edicts (645-647 C.E.)

- Promulgated by the Emperor Kotoku
- The government nationalized the nobles’ land and, in exchange, granted them stipends and official positions
- Real purpose was to strengthen the central government and the emperor
- One edict set up a Grand Council of State, which supervised a cabinet of eight ministries
- Envoys were sent to China to learn everything about its culture and society
Nara Period (710-794 C.E.)

• New capital was set up in Nara (southeast of Kyoto)
• City was laid out like Chang’an, on a grid
• During this time Buddhism becomes truly established in Japan
Todaiji Temple in Nara, the world’s largest wooden building
Heian Era (794-1192 C.E.)

- Period celebrated in Japanese history for its cultural brilliance
- “Heian” means “peace and tranquillity”
- Named for Japan’s new capital, Heian (the future Kyoto); like Nara, it is laid out on a grid, just bigger
- More uniquely Japanese cultural traits develop (e.g., the development of a more syllabic script (kana) to be used in conjunction with Chinese characters (kanji) in writing)
Politically, the Fujiwara clan come to dominate Japan through its hereditary control of the office of regent; the emperors were essentially their puppets.
Court culture produces some fascinating literary works, esp. by women

- Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book* (ca 1002 C.E.)
- Lady Murasaki Shikibu, *Tale of Genji* (ca 1010 C.E.)
- Fujiwara no Kinto (+1041), Waka poetry
Murasaki was raised at court by her father. After marriage, she also probably served as a lady-in-waiting to the empress.
Her *Tale of Genji* is perhaps the world’s earliest novel.
It tells the tale of a handsome young prince at court. It also tells us much about the sophisticated culture in which he lived. Aristocratic women, while prevented from governing, are given many freedoms.
Over the course of the Heian Era the peasant’s situation probably worsens; the growing importance of the *shoen* system, tax-exempt manors or estates controlled by powerful families or Buddhist monasteries, doesn’t help
Kamakura shogunate (1192-1333 C.E.)

- Replaces the Heian form of government
- New strongman, Minamoto no Yoritomo (r. 1147-1199), sets up power base on the Kamakura peninsula south of present-day Tokyo
- Minamoto is called shogun and rules through the Bakufu (“tent government”)
- The emperor has titular authority while the shogun exercised actual power
- Samurai (warrior class) are enlisted to support Moritomo and other lords
The shogun imposed some measure of stability in Japan while also foiling two major threats of invasion, notably by Kubilai Khan and the Mongols.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Mongol attack, in 1281 by 150,000 men, is defeated with help from a \textit{kamikaze} ("divine wind") which destroys the Mongol fleet (the real cause of their destruction: a typhoon)
Ashikaga shogunate (1333-1467 C.E.)

• Replaces the Kamakura shogunate
• Unable to restore the centralized power of their predecessors
• Despite (or perhaps because of) this decentralization of power, manufacturing and commerce develop rapidly
• *Daimyo* ("great names"), heads of great noble families, control vast landed estates
Rigid Class Structure

- Emperor
- Daimyo and other aristocrats
- Local officials and well-to-do peasants
- Landed peasantry
- Landless laborers (*Genin*)
- Hereditary slaves and outcastes (*Eta*)
Two major religions in Japan, then as now: Shintoism and Buddhism

- **Shintoism** is focused on worship of spirits in nature and on purification rituals.
- **Buddhism** is led by two sects, the **Pure Land** (or Jodo) sect and the **Zen** (or Chan) sect.
- The Jodo sect teaches that devotion alone can lead to enlightenment (*sartori*) and release whereas the Zen sect cultivated meditation and self-discipline.
Some characteristics:
- Old is better than new
- Asymmetrical is better than symmetrical
- Unfinished is better than finished
- Indirect is better than direct