

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22353-9 - The Cambridge History of Japan: Volume 2: Heian Japan

Edited by Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough

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## INTRODUCTION

The Heian period opened in 794 with the building of a new capital, Heian-kyō, later known as Kyoto. The grand plan of the new city, on a larger scale than earlier capitals, expressed the ambitious vision of Emperor Kammu. No other Japanese emperor had ever taken into his own hands so decisively the absolute powers of the emperor as conceived in Chinese theory. He and some of his immediate successors not only asserted the authority of the throne; they took positive measures designed to improve the effectiveness of the central government in administering the country. Theirs was a dedicated attempt to revitalize the system of administration modeled on the governmental machinery of T'ang China and operate it effectively. Throughout the four centuries of the Heian era the imperial court continued as the only political center, but the effectiveness of its administration declined gradually. The title of emperor continued in the imperial line without dynastic change, as it does to this day, but many of the reigning emperors were reduced to figureheads, manipulated by noble families at court, notably the Fujiwara, and later by senior retired emperors. The Heian period closed in 1185 when the struggle for hegemony among the warrior families resulted in the victory of Minamoto no Yoritomo and most political initiatives devolved into his hands at his headquarters at Kamakura. The imperial court continued at Kyoto, playing a largely ceremonial and legitimizing role, while political power was exercised by military overlords until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

During Heian times, however, there was no challenge to the central position of the imperial court; rather, there was a gradual decline in its ability to derive adequate income from the provinces to sustain itself in the style it had designed. Similarly, although the principle of monarchical rule was unquestioned, actual political power was usually exercised, after the first century and a half, by a Fujiwara or by a senior imperial relative acting in the name of the emperor. In fact, historians, both medieval and modern, of loyalist sympathies regard

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as the golden age of Japanese history those decades of direct rule by enlightened, “virtuous” emperors – Kammu (781–806) and Saga (809–23), and again Uda and Daigo (887–930). For loyalists, these were the years when Japanese rulers most closely approached the ideal reigns of the sage-kings of ancient China. Probably the direct rule that these emperors exercised was praised, without close inquiry into how wise their policies may have been.

The system of government at the beginning of the Heian period was a remarkable copy, somewhat modified, of the Chinese institutions of the Sui (581–618) and T’ang (618–907) dynasties. The emperor was expected to rule with absolute authority. He was served by high ministers and a council of state, overseeing an elaborate centralized bureaucracy arranged in ministries (eight in the Japanese version) and numerous bureaus and offices. Japan, with a population estimated at 6 or 7 million, was divided into sixty-eight provinces (*kuni*), including two island provinces, as of 823, each with a provincial headquarters overseen by a governor. Provinces were subdivided into districts (*gun* or *kōri*), eight or nine on the average, each with an administrative office. In China the bureaucratic structure was staffed by officials selected for appointment on the basis of qualifications as determined by examinations. The examination system was not properly instituted in Japan. Some students at the state Academy (*Daigaku-ryō*) did take examinations, but appointment to office was determined largely by the court rank of the candidate’s family and by family and marital connections rather than by qualifications or ability. The Chinese prohibition against appointment in one’s native district was not observed in Japan.

Rice land was nationalized, in principle, and it was allotted to families of cultivators according to the ages and sex of family members. Allotments were subject to revision and adjustment every six years. Uniform taxes were levied on the basis of rice-field holdings, payable in grain, and there were handicraft-produce taxes frequently payable in textiles, a corvée, and a military service tax. In order to operate the land system, it was essential to survey the rice fields and prepare current registers of land allotted and a census at six-year intervals. The procurement of a literate and efficient staff, dedicated to the government’s interests, to operate this complex land and tax system may well have been beyond the country’s human resources. Provincial administration required the building and maintenance of a network of highways and a post system. It is not known when and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

how extensively the facilities were completed in areas distant from the capital, especially in the eastern provinces.

The T'ang system of government is referred to by Japanese historians as the *ritsuryō* (statutory) system: *ritsu* is the penal code, specifying punishments for various offenses, and *ryō* is the administrative code that provides detailed regulations and instructions for the operation of government and society. The Taihō code, completed in 701, and its revision, the Yōrō code, in 718 (but not put into effect until 757), generally followed the T'ang code. The *ryō* of Yōrō had over nine hundred articles. It was later amplified by supplementary rules. *Kyaku* were new orders or modifications of existing law, while *shiki* were issued to provide additional detail for provisions of the *ritsuryō* and *kyaku*. These supplements, designed to make the *ritsuryō* system operate more effectively by expanding on existing provisions or sometimes overruling them, were compiled diligently in early Heian into the tenth century.

When Chinese institutions were introduced from the beginning of the seventh century, they were seriously compromised by native traditions of aristocratic privilege. The elite class had long been organized in *uji* (clans or lineage groups), bound together by descent from a common ancestor, the clan deity (*ujigami*). Among the large clans in Yamato in central Japan, one rose above the others and assumed a kingly role. Claiming descent from the Sun Goddess, its chief, in his sacerdotal function, interceded with the deities on behalf of all of the clans. He also mediated relations among clans. In the sixth century, by conquest and negotiation, this Sun line extended its authority over much of Japan in league with its supporting clan chiefs, who performed specialized services as warriors, ritualists, administrators, and fiscal agents, functioning increasingly like ministers of a king.

The relative status level of the leading *uji* chiefs was recognized by hereditary court titles (*kabane*) conferred by the king of the Sun line to honor superior lineages. Competitiveness among the chiefs for status was the source of considerable turbulence within the Yamato group. It is significant that one of the first Chinese institutions to be adopted in 604 was the system of twelve cap-ranks, designating the colors of caps in official court dress. The scheme of court ranks was elaborated several times during the seventh century, increasing the number of gradations to nineteen, then to twenty-six, and in 685 to an eight-rank system with forty-eight steps, demonstrating the care with which gradations in hierarchy among the clan

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chiefs and their followers were adjusted to proclaim their relationship to the Yamato king.

This king came to be called *tennō* (literally, “heaven [descended] luminance”), conventionally translated “emperor.” Like the Chinese Son of Heaven, he claimed absolute authority to all of the land. Private titles to rice fields were abolished in principle, as were agricultural and craft support groups that had served and supported the clans. To gain the acquiescence of the affiliated clans, he appointed their members to new Chinese-style official positions and assigned lands and households for their support. Rice land was granted according to court rank, office held, and meritorious service. Powerholders of regional clans whose cooperation was needed were also given grants and official positions. Court rank gave honored status and assurance of eligibility for hereditary appointments. The awarding of lower grades of rank restricted the number of lineages that could compete for high office. In effect, a new court aristocracy was formed selectively from the *uji* at great expense to the public domain. In the eighth century this was a large group, for more than 120 clans can be recognized, but by mid-Heian only about 10 of the clans were playing a significant role.

The first chapter of this volume, by William McCullough, describes the politics of the Heian court, beginning with the strong rule of Emperor Kammu and continuing until the reassertion of direct imperial rule by Go-Sanjō in 1068. During the first half-century the highest officials were drawn mostly from the imperial clan. Thereafter, in the competition for appointment to high office, the Northern Branch of the Fujiwara clan increasingly succeeded in excluding from high office other clans and also the other branches of the Fujiwara. This predominance came in good part from their success in providing emperors with Fujiwara daughters who produced heirs to the throne. The practice of a Fujiwara head, as grandfather of a young emperor, serving as his grandson’s regent began in 866 and became the regular pattern. (Hitherto only imperial princes had served as regent.) Emperors were often persuaded to abdicate before reaching manhood. Early abdication had been common since the middle of the seventh century. It was often a welcome escape from the ceremonial demands of the position, palace intrigue, and the constant requests for favors from imperial relatives and families which had supplied women for the harem. It became a regular practice for Fujiwara relatives to serve as regent for adult as well as child



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

emperors, and after 967 an unbroken succession of Fujiwara held the office of regent. This was possible because the Fujiwara played the game of marriage politics with consummate skill, aided by the good fortune of usually having available a supply of eligible imperial consorts.

The few strong emperors who ruled directly in early Heian proved to be the exception in Japanese history. The actual power of political initiative was delegated to (or usurped by) Fujiwara relatives. The emperor's role again became largely ceremonial and sacerdotal as he receded to a position above politics. The preference for indirect rule that had been evident since the clan period prevailed again. The domination of the court by the Fujiwara leader reached its height with Michinaga, especially in the years from 1016 to 1028.

During this time when the aristocracy was ascendant, the number favored with privilege was not large, perhaps only two or three hundred principal male members of the nobility at any one time. Those who actually wielded power may have numbered only a dozen or two and were almost all Fujiwara, except for a few Minamoto (of courtier, nonwarrior families). The five or six highest offices were reserved for lineages that traditionally might reach the first three court ranks, senior nobles known as *kugyō*, a group that also included men of the Fourth Rank who served on the Council of State. Lower on the scale, but also among the privileged nobles, were those of the Fourth Rank (ministers, for example) and Fifth Rank (governors of large provinces, among others).

Although the wealth of the aristocracy came from a variety of sources, well into the eleventh century its mainstay was income attached to rank and office. In the eleventh century, however, the lower ranks of the nobility seem often to have received little or nothing in the way of official income, depending for their livelihood on service in the households of the great aristocrats, who had concentrated most of the government's resources in their own hands. There was, in addition, some income obtained from landed proprietorships called *shōen* (estates). It was this small, ancient, completely urbanized society of aristocratic civil officials, living mostly on appointive incomes, that produced either directly or through patronage most of what we think of as Heian aristocratic culture, which is discussed in Chapter 6 by Helen McCullough.

The monopoly of power held by the Fujiwara continued until 1068, when Go-Sanjō came to the throne, the first emperor in 170 years

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whose mother was not a Fujiwara. During his short reign he reasserted monarchical powers. For the next century until the end of the Heian period, the Fujiwara, while continuously holding the post of regent and other high offices, had little actual power, being kept in check by three strong emperors (Shirakawa, Toba, and Go-Shirakawa). Each of these three, after a relatively short reign, abdicated, took up residence in a “cloister” (*in*), and established the Administrative Office of the Senior Retired Emperor (*in-no-chō*). This office, in its peculiar mixture of private and public functions, resembled the Administrative office (*mandokoro*) that had been created much earlier by the Fujiwara and other noble families to manage their family affairs, even to the formation of a guard unit and client relationships with warrior families. This organization enabled the retired emperors to develop more effectively landholding and other resources for the support of the imperial family and to hold the upper hand over the Fujiwara and dominate the court as few emperors had. As father or grandfather of the reigning emperor, the senior retired emperor played a regental role, dominating not only the emperor but also any younger retired emperors. He displaced the Fujiwara regent as the acknowledged authority in national affairs. This practice of political domination by the senior retired emperor, known as *insei*, “cloister government,” is the subject of Chapter 9 by G. Cameron Hurst. The shift of power to the ex-emperors can be viewed as another phase in the ebb and flow of political strength between the imperial line and noble families with which it intermarried, a pattern that was already familiar in the Yamato clan period and in the Nara court.

Perhaps the greatest attribute of the Chinese state was its capital, an enormous walled city laid out in a symmetrical grid pattern dominated by the huge buildings of the imperial palace compound. The city plan was a most impressive symbolic representation of imperial grandeur. Kammu’s new capital, Heian-kyō, following this model, was designed to make a powerful statement. True, it was overly ambitious and too costly, for it was never possible to fill out the complete grid. But while earlier capitals were all short-lived, Kyoto remained the imperial capital for more than a thousand years, from 794 to 1869. Until the seventeenth century it was the only real city in Japan. Chapter 2, by William McCullough, is devoted to a description of the capital, its plan and architecture, its economy and commerce, its population and the social world of noble households.

## INTRODUCTION

7

For the major policy and administrative problems engaged by the early Heian emperors, we turn again to the first chapter. In addition to building a new capital, Kammu may also have had in mind the T'ang example of mounting military campaigns to subjugate and absorb "barbarian" border areas. Since early Nara there had been numerous expeditions to subdue the ethnic people in the northeast. Kammu intensified the effort and by 804 finally met with success. However, the great expense of the expeditions together with the building of the new capital exhausted the treasury.

Among measures of fiscal retrenchment taken by Kammu was to restrict the large number of imperial princes and princesses receiving government support under provisions of the statutory system. In 805, more than one hundred were reduced to noble status, a measure taken by several succeeding emperors. Some sons of high-ranking consorts were granted the clan name Minamoto, and a few imperial grandchildren were given such clan names as Taira, Ariwara, and others. Some of these imperial descendants found careers as court nobles and others joined the provincial gentry.

Kammu and his immediate successors attempted to make their administrations more effective by introducing several new offices. To check misappropriation of tax rice and other assets from the provincial account by an outgoing governor, a board of agents known as *kageyushi* was appointed in Kammu's reign to audit a governor's accounts and the transfer of property to the incoming governor. Both parties were held accountable for discrepancies.

In 810, Emperor Saga established the *kurōdodokoro* (Chamberlains' Office), staffed by trusted men, to ensure confidentiality in the handling of important documents. Later it transmitted imperial edicts and supervised the imperial archives. In time it also came to handle the emperor's household affairs.

Also in Saga's time, in response to lawlessness in the capital and the surrounding region, a new police organization known as *kebiishi* ("Offenses Investigation Agents") gradually evolved. The functions of the Imperial Police included not only security matters and the arrest of miscreants but also the investigation, trial, sentencing, and imprisonment of criminals, thus replacing some of the duties of several existing offices. Later, branches were placed in some provinces and its *kebiishi* agents investigated land ownership, tax evasion, and other matters.

These new offices were established, one may conjecture, because the functions they served were not being performed satisfactorily by

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the existing *ritsuryō* offices. Or, in some instances, the emperor and his circle may have aimed to bring the functions in question under more immediate control. Many of the offices provided for by the statutory code were languishing, either because they were not considered essential or because the government had insufficient revenues to keep them in operation. By the end of the ninth century half of the central government's *ritsuryō* offices had been abandoned and the number of officials was much reduced.

The primary mission of the provincial government office and its subunits, the district offices, was to collect local products in the form of taxes and forward them to the capital. These products, including rice and other foodstuffs, were all of the goods and services needed to support officials of the central government and supply the specific needs of the capital and its elites: textiles, handicrafts, and local products such as salt, iron, paper mulberry, and many other goods. Rice was collected not only by direct taxation, but also as rental on rice land lent out by the provincial government. Rice was also collected on seed rice lent to cultivators for planting in the spring. At the beginning, corvée and military service were also part of tax obligations. In Chapter 3, "Land and Society," Dana Morris discusses how this all-important tax structure of the beginning of Heian underwent continual changes during the following centuries.

The provincial capitals were designed as small versions of the grid plan of the Heian-kyō. Detailed regulations for the staffing and operation of the provincial government, described by Cornelius Kiley in Chapter 4, "Provincial Administration and Land Tenure in Early Heian," indicate the importance central officials attached to the province's mission. A directive of 822 specifies a large and specialized staff for the provincial office to perform various administrative functions and compile the required annual reports, tax-grain inventory, list of tribute, number of taxable households, acreage under cultivation, percentage of crop damage, and so forth.

Responsibility for the administration of a province was entrusted to a governor selected from the middle ranks of the Kyoto nobility and appointed usually for four years. He was accompanied to his post by a number of staff members, but most of the officeholders in the provincial headquarters were members of the local elites in positions that, by and large, were permanent and hereditary. It was usually difficult for the governor to prevail against the interests of the



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

9

locally based officials. Increasingly the governors were absentee, the position a sinecure, and the executive function left to a deputy.

The subprovincial district offices were staffed entirely by local gentry. As a consequence, the administration of land and the collection of taxes were carried out by locals who, backed by governmental authority, benefited greatly from their positions in income and landholding. Although the mission of a provincial office was to marshal local resources for the benefit of the central government, it developed into a bargaining place for the division of resources between capital and country. Some governors sought the post, even purchased it, with the expectation of enriching themselves. As a consequence of these competing interests, the share that went to Kyoto declined steadily.

In the attempt to ensure its income, the government set a revenue quota for each province, charging the governor with the responsibility of meeting the contracted amount. In effect this policy recognized the provincial government as a semiautonomous unit with tax obligations to the central government. It was permitted to make certain changes in the tax system, adding new taxes or occasional levies, to meet its quota. This was a significant departure from the principle of the statutory code of a national, uniform tax system. Morris argues that the modifications in the tax system, while abandoning provisions of the code, were changes that better met the capital's needs and, at the same time, were more efficient and better fitted the rural economy. The changes succeeded at length in stabilizing the government's income. However, the quotas were set using the tax base as it stood about the year 900. As a consequence, Morris points out, the central government did not benefit from the increase in agricultural output brought about by expansion of acreage and by higher yields produced by improvements in agricultural methods. Among the improvements were the introduction of an animal-drawn plow with moldboard, the use of draft animals, better fertilizer, and other innovations discussed by Morris.

The system of allotting rice fields on the basis of census registration operated reasonably well in the Nara period, but reallocations came to a halt about 840. Scholars have suggested a variety of causes for the suspension of reallocation. Morris demonstrates that the primary reason was the shortage of land available for distribution. Population had increased by more than a million during Nara, creating a demand for allocations that the government could not meet.

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[More information](#)

Since early in the Nara period the government had encouraged the opening of new rice fields, and much land continued to be reclaimed. Because of the high cost of developing irrigated rice land, the government was obliged in 743, as an incentive, to grant developers permanent possession of reclaimed land, the source of many of the first *shōen* (estates). In the Heian period, however, *shōen* were created, in effect, when the central government ordered the transfer of tax payments on segments of land from the provincial government to a religious institution or a noble family in the capital. Subsequently there was an increase in the number of *shōen* established by commendation. Local magnates or land managers were often in conflict with provincial officials over land rights, management authority, and tax immunities. They tried to prevent the interference of provincial authorities by commending rights (*shiki*) to the land under their control to a Kyoto aristocrat or a major religious institution as “proprietor” (*ryōke*) while retaining hereditary rights of management and control of the cultivators. In return for a fee or a share of the *shōen*’s income, the *ryōke* sought to protect the rights claimed by the local manager. If the *ryōke* could not command enough influence at court to accomplish this task, he might make a further commendation to a member of the imperial family or one of the most powerful Fujiwara or to a great temple (*honke*). By late Heian, nearly half of the agricultural land had become *shōen* in this way. This privatization of land, or rights to land, was carried out, for the most part, within the provisions of the statutory code and was usually well supported by documentation.

The greater part of the agricultural land may have remained in the public domain under the administration of the provincial headquarters – designated as *kokugaryō* (provincial domains) – but *shōen* probably provided most of the economic support of court nobles, religious institutions, and even the imperial family. Emperor Go-Sanjō in 1069 ordered a major nationwide registration of *shōen* to examine their legality and rule on their tax exemption claims. Such inquiries, which had begun as early as the ninth century, continued periodically until the end of Heian. Sorting out claims of land parcels to *shōen* or *kokugaryō* status was a continuous process. Also in frequent dispute was the question of which parcels of *shōen* land were liable for which provincial levies. Issues such as these were usually present in the centuries-long struggle of the central government to control local officials and landholders. But, lacking effective means of coercion, the authorities gradually lost ground. Thus, landholding and tax systems