

Summary: Ancient Japan

Early Japan

In early Japan, people lived in kingdoms organized by clans. The Yamato clan ruled Japan for hundreds of years beginning around A.D. 250. During this time, people practiced Shinto. Shinto teaches that a god-like spirit lives in every object and force of nature.

Around this time Japan began to borrow ideas from its neighbors. From Korea, Japan learned how to make tools and weapons from bronze and iron. The Japanese learned how to grow rice from Korea, as well. In the A.D. 500s, a Japanese ruler began to study Buddhism as well as the literature and culture of China. He sent priests and students to study in China. The Chinese form of government, writing system, and calendar were shared with Japan as a result of this exchange.

Feudal Japan

In the Middle Ages, the feudal system developed in Europe. Powerful lords owned large estates. They needed protection against outlaws and rival lords. By the 1100s, a similar system developed in Japan. Warriors called samurai protected the lords and their estates. Like the knights of medieval Europe, the samurai promised to serve a particular lord. The samurai became a separate social class, providing both military and government services.

Fighting between clans at this time led to a new kind of warrior government. The shogun was the emperor's chief general and held great power. In 1603, a powerful shogun named Tokugawa Ieyasu moved the capital to the city of Edo.

Europeans began to arrive in Japan to trade or to convert the Japanese. Many Japanese became Catholic. By the 1630s, the shogun was worried about foreigners in Japan. He learned that the Spanish had built a settlement in the Philippines. He worried that this might happen in Japan, too. The shogun ordered all Christians to leave the country. He promised to put to death any Japanese person who left and then returned to the country. For the next 200 years, Japan was isolated from most contact with the outside world.

Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

clan *noun*, a group of families who trace their descent from a common ancestor

samurai *noun*, warriors who protected the estates of feudal warlords in Japan

shogun *noun*, the emperor's chief general

After You Read

REVIEW What does Japan's experience with learning from its neighbors tell you about the importance of cultural exchange? Underline ideas about technology and religion that Japan got from its neighbors, Korea and China.

REVIEW How did the use of samurai differ from the use of an army? Circle details that tell who the samurai worked for and what kinds of services they offered.

REVIEW Why did Tokugawa Ieyasu isolate Japan? Draw a box around the sentences that help answer this question.