

## CHAPTER TWO

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# The Heian Period

*G. Cameron Hurst III*

Heian is Japan's classical age, when court power was at its zenith and aristocratic culture flourished. Understandably, it has long been assiduously studied by historians. The Heian period is the longest of the accepted divisions of Japanese history, covering almost exactly 400 years. Its dates seem obvious: "The Heian period opened in 794 with the building of a new capital, Heian-kyō, later known as Kyoto. . . . 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."<sup>1</sup> Although the establishment of a new capital would seem irrefutable evidence of the start of a new "period," some argue that the move of the capital from Nara to Nagaoka in 784 better marks the beginning of the era. Indeed, some even consider the accession of Emperor Kammu in 781 a better starting date. Heian gives way to the next period, the Kamakura era, at the end of the twelfth century and the conclusion of the Gempei War. The end dates are even more contested and include (1) 1180 and Taira no Kiyomori's forced move of the capital to Fukuhara; (2) 1183 and the flight of the Taira from the capital; (3) 1185, the end of the war and Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa's confirmation of Minamoto no Yoritomo's right to appoint *shugo* and *jitō*; or (4) 1192 and Yoritomo's appointment as shōgun. The most conventional date, as indicated in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, is 1185.

The Heian period obviously takes its name from the fact that the capital was located there, although of course that situation did not technically change for the rest of premodern Japanese history, even if the center of *power* may have shifted. But the subsequent period is marked off by the assumption of greater political power by the newly risen warrior class, whose political center was established by Yoritomo in Kamakura. Thus the Heian period is essentially a political division reflecting an era in which power was exercised from the capital at Heian. In distinction to the subsequent eras of warrior power, it is seen as an age dominated by a small cluster of aristocrats who ruled under the aegis of the emperor by mastery of the civil rather than the military arts. Thus, the term "Heian" (the characters mean "peace" and "tranquility") suggests cultural considerations as well as political, namely literature, art, Chinese learning, and Buddhist thought. Indeed, for contemporary Japanese the most vivid reminders of their Heian period are likely Murasaki Shikibu's literary classic *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) and the cultural splendor of the early eleventh century.

## Historical Limitations

The study of Heian history is limited by the amount of surviving materials and their focus. There is an almost inevitable problem that the focus is on the politics and culture of the capital and its immediate environs (the five home provinces or *gokinai*) rather than the provinces. Partly that has to do with the survival of historical materials. It is virtually axiomatic that the closer we come to the present era, the greater the availability of printed materials for the study of history. Thus the Heian period is definitely resource-rich compared to the Nara period, yet it is woefully bereft of documents compared, for example, to the Kamakura.

Court-sponsored official histories came to an end with the death of Emperor Kōkō in 887, and later private histories were much abbreviated in coverage and focused more upon the activities of the inner court. Thanks to the heroic efforts of the late Takeuchi Rizō, however, all the surviving diplomatics (*komonjo*) of the period are collected into the *Heian ibun*. For the first 300 years of the period, until the inauguration of Shirakawa's rule as abdicated emperor, there are only 1,250 such documents. (Yet we know that the *ritsuryō* state generated a mountain of paperwork. It is estimated that in the tenth century, for example, central government scribes produced more than 350 million characters per year! This figure is impressive, even though it does not even include "numerous documents issued by provincial and district offices and villages, Buddhist institutions, personal writings, or correspondence.")<sup>2</sup> Thereafter surviving documents increase in number, but the collected Kamakura period sources (*Kamakura ibun*) far outnumber Heian documents, although the period covers only a century and a half. Fortunately, these few Heian documents can be supplemented by a number of surviving diaries of courtiers, primarily members of the Fujiwara clan such as Michinaga and Sanesuke and at least two emperors; but while these are often quite detailed in nature, their scope is limited to say the least, concerned largely with the details of court life in the capital. Thus, the period is not easily recreated from the surviving materials.

A good example, to be discussed at greater length below, is the early tenth century when the strenuous efforts of Emperor Kammu to reinvigorate the *ritsuryō* institutions were abandoned for a series of reforms of local control that more realistically addressed the complex mix of public and private land holdings in the countryside. While the outlines of the changes have become clear over the past few decades, detailed sources on the actual political decision-making process are rare indeed.

By comparison, there is a rather large collection of literary outpourings from the Heian period in various genres, so that, compared to the work of historians of Heian politics and society, literature specialists have considerable materials to rely upon. This has tended to skew writings on the Heian period towards the cultural aspects of the society, especially outside of Japan. In English, for example, there is a decided lack of materials on the history of the Heian period, despite its length and recognized importance in Japanese history. Only in 1999 did Cambridge University Press publish volume 2 (*Heian Japan*) of its *Cambridge History of Japan*, despite the fact that the authors had been working on it for at least two decades. Moreover, the bibliography identified fewer than ten single volumes devoted wholly or even mainly to the Heian period. My own *Insei: Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan*,

*1086–1185*, for example, still contains far more political history of the early and mid-Heian period than any other work, although it was published almost thirty years ago, in 1976. For some reason – not only dearth of sources, but also perhaps the difficulty of deciphering them – the Heian period has not attracted the interest of many historians outside Japan. (See the discussion of Western scholarship below.)

### **The Transition from Nara to Heian, 784–794**

The problem with setting a date for the beginning of Heian is related to the complexity of political problems and capital construction in the late eighth century under Emperor Kammu. Kammu, perhaps the strongest emperor in Japanese history, was fortunate ever to have become sovereign. The Nara court had fallen under the influence of the Buddhist priest Dōkyō and his associates during the reign of Empress Shōtoku (764–70), who had previously reigned as Kōken (749–58). Dōkyō was exiled at the empress's death. The courtier responsible for the exile, Fujiwara no Momokawa, was also the primary supporter of Emperor Kōnin (770–81), Kammu's father, who came to the throne at the age of 62. At length, Momokawa was also responsible for Kammu's own accession after the mysterious death of Crown Prince Osabe in 775. Kammu was Kōnin's eldest son, but was not originally seen as the successor due to the low status of his mother (of Paekche descent), but Momokawa eventually swayed the court in Kammu's favor.

Abandoning the capital at Nara after only seventy years was partly a reaction against the deep secular influence of the entrenched Buddhist clergy at Nara, as exemplified by the ascendancy of Dōkyō, as well as by the imposing temple that seem to overwhelm the emperor's own palace. There were political reasons as well (see below), and a fear of the vengeful spirits of the deceased Prince Osabe and his mother. Perhaps more importantly, Emperor Kōnin's accession represented a shift in the imperial line away from the descendants of former Emperor Temmu (r. 668–71) to those of Tenji (r. 672–86), and the move of the capital seems to have represented a choice to move from the seat of the Tenji-based lineage in Yamato province around Nara northeast to Yamashiro, an area in which the Temmu line was dominant.<sup>3</sup>

At any rate, Kammu and his court selected the area in Yamashiro known as Nagaoka for the construction of a new capital and appointed Momokawa's nephew Tanetsugu (whose maternal family was also from the Nagaoka area) to manage the project, which required massive amounts of conscripted peasant labor. Although the city was far from complete, Kammu moved there in the fifth month of 784. Indeed, had things gone according to plan, we might today be studying the "Nagaoka period" of Japanese history, but fate intervened to effect the further transfer to Heian. The proximate cause was the assassination of Fujiwara no Tanetsugu. His death was related to yet another struggle over succession, this time between Kammu's younger brother and Crown Prince Sawara and his eldest son Prince Ate, favored as next sovereign by Tanetsugu. When Tanetsugu was attacked and murdered in the streets of Nagaoka one night in the ninth month of 785, suspicion fell on Prince Sawara and associates in the Otomo family. Exiled to the island of Awaji, Sawara died soon thereafter. Sawara was generally believed to have been the innocent victim of a

plot, and his vengeful spirit regarded as the cause of the sudden deaths of Kammu's mother and empress, as well as the source of an epidemic and other unusual occurrences. Haunted by their spirits, Kammu elected to move yet again to Heian.

Thus, the decade from 784 to 794, which saw the move to and abandonment of Nagaoka, falls somewhere between the Nara and the Heian periods. No one has chosen to label this decade the "Nagaoka period," and it is most commonly seen as the tail end of the Nara era. Yet the above discussion suggests that it might just as easily fall within the boundaries of the Heian period as well.

### Underlying Assumptions

Two underlying assumptions seem to govern the historiography of Heian Japan. First, there is a sense that the period represents a privatization of the political and economic institutions of the state. The period commences with an attempt to reinvigorate the imported system of administration based upon a Tang Chinese bureaucratic model, largely seen as "public" insofar as land and people were to be nationalized under the public authority of an omnipotent emperor. But slowly, public lands developed into private holdings, specific public offices became the "private" preserves of certain families, and familial and local interest overrode public needs. In slightly different terms, the late John W. Hall, in a path-breaking work, cast the Heian period as a time of "return to familial authority," arguing that the Chinese bureaucratic model was simply laid over an earlier Japan native form of familial authority. It was this "familial authority" that reasserted itself in Heian times, as represented by the *shōen* system, indirect rule by Fujiwara regents and retired sovereigns through familial ties, and incipient feudal warrior bands, bound by patron-client relations to royal and noble houses.<sup>4</sup>

A second and related concept is that Heian Japan represents a return to "native" traditions. This is especially strong in the cultural area, but again is part of the idea that Japan in the Taika and Nara eras had attempted to buttress a weakly organized emergent polity by the wholesale adoption of things Chinese, not only the bureaucratic-legal system, but its language, art and architecture, and Buddhist and Confucian thought as well. By the mid-Heian period, however, with the emergence of the *kana*-based syllabary, a "native" literature blossomed. Moreover, artistic representations became more Japanese, and Shintō-Buddhist religious syncretism resulted in a more "Japanese" form of religious expression. It is in this sense that Heian represents Japan's "classical age," a time when a truly Japanese culture flourished.

### Heian Political History

Since the Japanese borrowed the periodization scheme of European history in the Meiji period, and found that it accorded rather well with the Japanese experience, the Heian period has been grouped with the Nara era as constituting "ancient Japan," the establishment of warrior government in Kamakura and the ascendancy of warriors seemingly indicating an easy association with the "medieval" era. This is still the way most texts and sets of volumes devoted to Japanese history present the pageant of

Japanese history; and indeed it works far better than imposing Western historical divisions on China, for example, where the Tang and Song dynasties are assigned the role of “medieval” China with little more justification than that they fall somewhere in the dynastic middle.

But many scholars have not found it so easy to equate “Heian” with “ancient” and “Kamakura” with “medieval,” what Wayne Farris has referred to as the “Western analogue” model that once ruled Japanese scholarship and for a long time dominated Western scholarship.<sup>5</sup> On the Japanese side, the dominance of Marxist historical analysis in the decades following World War II sparked a greater concern with social and economic organization and led most scholars to see “medieval” Japan as beginning in the Heian period, connected with the rise of *shōen*. Western scholarship, as well as some Japanese scholars have, in the past several decades, tended instead to narrow the borders of Japan’s medieval era by recasting the Kamakura as very early medieval or late ancient, due to the persistence of Heian institutions, wishing to see a more truly medieval, often considered as synonymous with feudal, society commencing with full ascension to political power by the warrior aristocracy in the fourteenth century. Thus the 1997 volume resulting from an Oxford conference in 1994 and edited by the late Jeffrey P. Mass was titled *The Origins of Japan’s Medieval World: Courtiers, Cleric, Warriors and Peasants in the Fourteenth Century*.

But if all the Heian period has been normally lumped into the ancient period, tremendous differences in political and economic organization marked off certain centuries of these 400 years, allowing historians to delineate subdivisions of the Heian era. The simplest division is to separate the period into early and late Heian at the mid tenth century. The first period witnesses the survival of the borrowed Tang Chinese *ritsuryō* system, with significant “feudal” tendencies developing in society, and then the latter period represents a greater degree of feudalization in the countryside that undermined the *ritsuryō* state and gave rise to new forms of political control by first the Fujiwara gentry, then the retired emperors, and finally yielded to the rule of warriors.

Historians everywhere seem to favor tripartite divisions (a beginning, middle, and end), and so sometimes the early period is seen as followed by a middle period when the Fujiwara dominated the court, and then a late period when retired sovereigns controlled court politics. But a four-part division, an elaboration of the early–late schema with a further elaboration on each end, is perhaps the most common form of Heian periodization. This division is political, following what appears to be somewhat obvious changes in the central administration of the Heian state.

### Early Heian, 794–887

The first period, early Heian, is deemed to cover roughly the first 100 years of Heian, the “capital for ten thousand reigns,” and focusing on the reigns of Kammu to Uda. It is seen often as an extension of the Nara period, and with good reason since Emperor Kammu lived in the three capitals of the day: enthroned in Nara, he erected a new capital at Nagaoka to which he moved, before once again constructing a larger capital at Heian and moving once again. Kammu, the most vigorous of Heian emperors, had endeavored to breathe life back into the Tang-style administrative system that had developed in Nara times, but he was besieged by problems: the undue

influence of Buddhist clergy in political affairs; recalcitrant and difficult-to-subdue Ezo in the northeast; the malfunctioning of provincial tax extraction methods, which resulted in large numbers of absconding peasants; and the murder of Fujiwara no Tanetsugu and subsequent deaths of several of Kammu's relatives which threw a decided unease over Nagaoka.

The administrative system, modeled on borrowed Tang Chinese statutes compiled into the *ritsuryō* code (*ritsu* are the penal laws, *ryō* the administrative statutes), was designed to recreate on Japanese soil an approximate model of the Tang imperium, despite the tremendous differences in the levels of development of the two countries. Primary among the many features of the *ritsuryō*, or statutory, system was a complex land census system designed to extract taxes for the governing of the state, including the sizeable incomes of the imperial house and officials who administered the state. Land was considered national and allotted only to individual families, under a formula that allocated land differentially to the male, female, and slave members of families on a regular basis. To make the system work, a national census was to be taken every six years so that changes in family size would be reflected in each subsequent allocation. Needless to say, levels of provincial government literacy and talent, not to mention honesty, hampered the smooth application of such a complex system, with the result that regularized tax extraction was difficult. Peasants fled in large numbers to escape harsh taxation – corvée and military service were the most burdensome – and nobles, temples, and shrines took advantage of loopholes in the system and the fleeing peasants to form private estate holdings of their own.

Kammu tried various measures, the most important being the appointment of *kageyushi* (inspectors), to audit the tax registers and hold accountable the centrally appointed provincial governors for the proper allocation, accounting, and forwarding of provincial tax revenues. Attempts to revitalize the statutory system continued under his next several successors: changes included the stabilization of imperial house finances through the establishment of the *chokushiden* (edict fields) and a thoroughgoing reform of state finances. There was also a demonstrated commitment to a court-dominated Tang cultural style. Noble families established private educational academies; the court sponsored official national histories; and the new forms of Buddhism introduced from China, Tendai and Shingon, flourished. Thus, the early Heian period as a whole is regarded as one in which the Japanese court maintained a dogged adherence to imported Chinese higher civilization. But changes necessary to shore up the *ritsuryō* system already presaged significant changes in the second division of the Heian period.

Among those changes was the widespread development of private landholding, the spread of estates or *shōen*. Furthermore, the rise of what in the next period would become the full-blown Fujiwara regency style of rule was foreshadowed by the development of two new regental posts (*sesshō* and *kampaku*) by the father-son duo of Fujiwara no Yoshifusa and Mototsune. Moreover, the Fujiwara family engineered several plots that eliminated rivals for power.

### The Period 887–967

Against the background of these developments, the second subdivision of Heian Japan is the eighty-year period in which Emperors Uda and Daigo were able to

exercise considerable power without the influence of Fujiwara regents, which would become dominant by the latter part of the tenth century. This era covers the late ninth to the mid tenth century, was often referred to as the “rule of the Engi and Tenryaku,” and was looked back upon fondly by later commentators and modern historians cognizant that the Fujiwara would soon eclipse the imperial house in the exercise of actual power. During the era, the Northern Branch (*Hokke*) of the Fujiwara consolidated power in the clan under Tokihira and Tadahira, although Emperor Uda sponsored Sugawara no Michizane as a counterweight to the Fujiwara. There was an effort to curtail the rising private holdings of nobles and temples and other attempts (notably the ceding of considerable local autonomy to local governors, of which more later) to maintain the emperor-based power structure inherent in the *ritsuryō* system. Moreover, it was an era that saw the addition of amendments (*kyaku* and *shiki*) to make the *ritsuryō* system more appropriate to Japanese social realities, and that also witnessed the compilation of a final national history, the *Sandai jitsuryoku*. Thus, it has often been referred to as a “golden age” of imperial rule.

### The Period 967–1068

The third subperiod of Heian times is the era that most Japanese associate with the period as a whole, the roughly 100-year period from the mid tenth through the mid eleventh centuries, which represented the zenith of Fujiwara power and as well as the cultural flourishing of the court. Beginning with the exile of Fujiwara rival Minamoto no Takaakira in the so-called Anna Incident of 969, one lineage within the Northern Branch of the Fujiwara clan came to dominate the positions of regent and chancellor as well as to monopolize many high-ranking posts that constituted the noble (*kugyō*) council where most decisions were made. It was the era in which Fujiwara no Michinaga, widely acknowledged as the most powerful figure at the Heian court, not only in historical retrospect but at the time as well, and his son Yorimichi held power for some seven decades. Besides a few select Fujiwara lineages, only members of the imperial offshoot Murakami branch of the Minamoto held any of the significant posts at court.

The dominant sociopolitical feature of the era was the institution of an essentially permanent regency by one Fujiwara lineage – the so-called Fujiwara regent’s house – through the monopolization of the right to provide official consorts to the imperial house. Thus strategic marriages of his many daughters to successive emperors made Michinaga father to three emperors and grandfather to two more. The largely uxorilocal Heian marriage practices guaranteed that emperors were born of Fujiwara mothers and dominated by their maternal kinsmen in Fujiwara mansions from birth. It was this close marital relationship that allowed the exercise of regental power on behalf of increasingly young emperors by their Fujiwara fathers, grandfathers, or uncles.

The era represents the apex of Japanese court life in which the development of Japanese *kana* syllabary led to a burst of literary production, especially by court women. At the top of the list is Lady Murasaki Shikibu’s *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), but there were many more works that would later be recognized as Japanese classics, such as *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*) of Sei Shōnagon, *Kagerō nikki* (*The Gossamer Diary*) by a court lady known as the Mother of Michitsuna, and the diary of Lady Murasaki (*Murasaki Shikibu nikki*).

### The *Insei*, 1068–1185

The final 120 years of the Heian period are normally referred to as the *insei*, characterized by the shift of state power into the hands of three successive retired emperors. The era is usually regarded as commencing with the accession of Emperor Go-Sanjō in 1068, the first sovereign in 170 years not born to the daughter of a Fujiwara mother. Consequently, Go-Sanjō exercised an unusual degree of political power, and in abdication directed the succession towards his sons of a Minamoto empress. This paved the way for a revival of imperial power under Shirakawa, Toba, and Go-Shirakawa, each of whom served as cloistered (*in*) emperor, directing state affairs from retirement on behalf of young emperors in much the same way Fujiwara regents had done in the previous era. Under the *insei* system, the imperial house accumulated estate holdings, clients, and military supporters in a fashion similar to that of the Fujiwara.

Another key feature of the era was the rise to prominence of the warrior element in the “peaceful” capital of Heian. Literally *samurai*, or clients in the service of higher ranking courtiers, warriors provided military and police protection to the state as mercenary troops, “hired swords,” in Karl Friday’s term.<sup>6</sup> By the *insei* era, warrior clientage for the Fujiwara and imperial houses covered several generations, and two large warrior groupings with widespread provincial holdings, the Taira and Minamoto, had influence in Heian politics, primarily as provincial governors providing wealth as well as military support for the higher nobility.

The Taira especially, as clients of successive retired emperors, made inroads into court society, and after two major outbursts of political violence in the capital – the Hōgen Rebellion of 1156 and the Heiji Rebellion of 1159 – they eclipsed the Minamoto in military influence. Not only that, but under the leadership of Taira no Kiyomori, the family was able to break into the heretofore sacrosanct ranks of the *kugyō*, thanks to the patronage of former Emperor Go-Shirakawa. By the 1170s, however, Kiyomori even challenged the power of his patron; and when his own grandson became emperor (the infant Antoku), he tried to rule in a manner reminiscent of earlier Fujiwara regents. Kiyomori’s unprecedented rise to authoritarian power led to widespread discontent among courtiers both high and low – Kiyomori even decreed the removal of the capital briefly to Fukuhara (modern Kobe). Responding to a decree by Prince Mochihito, the Minamoto scion Yoritomo, in exile in Izu Province, led a movement against the Taira that widened into national civil war, later termed the Gempei (Minamoto–Taira) War. It pitted various branches of the Minamoto, as well as considerable numbers of local lords, without respect to clan affiliation, seeking greater security over land tenure against the Taira-backed court. The resulting defeat of the Taira forces at the Battle of Dannoura in the third month of 1185 effectively brought an end not only to the Taira, but to the Heian period as well.

### *Ōchō Kokka* (The “Royal Court State”)

What has been described at length above is the standard narrative account of the unfolding of the Heian period, but it obviously focuses upon slight reconstitutions of the ruling style or group: from emperor to Fujiwara regent to retired emperor,



leading next to shōgun. It is sketched against a backdrop of the decline and gradual extinction of the *ritsuryō* system (identified as the ancient state) based on the ideal of public lands and public subjects and its replacement by rising provincial warriors in a “feudal” system (identified as medieval Japan) in which private landholding and personal affiliations characteristic of the *shōen*, or manorial, system are paramount. Especially problematic is explaining how the *ritsuryō* state control could decline and provincial administration deteriorate at the same time as the eleventh century witnessed such a brilliant cultural flowering.

Since the 1970s, however, there has arisen a slightly different way of breaking down the Heian period’s four centuries that more closely relates the political and cultural developments in the capital with the social and economic changes in the provinces. This is the idea of the so-called *ōchō kokka*, or “royal court state,” associated most closely with Sakamoto Shōzō but now widely accepted by historians.<sup>7</sup> Noting that political history is inseparable from state policy-making, Sakamoto argues that there were two substantive changes in the state power structure in Heian times but these did not necessarily result in changes in the holders of power. As Cornelius Kiley once described the manner in which the state gradually lost control over agricultural output and military power: “The government lost a great deal of authority; the nobility, as a class, lost somewhat less.”<sup>8</sup> The “royal court state” theory argues that by reorganizing the state the rulers maintained control.

In this now widely accepted division of the Heian period, there are three distinct eras, each marked by a certain reorganization of state power. The first period is relatively similar to that elaborated above, that is, the *ritsuryō* or statutory state structure reinvigorated by Emperor Kammu, which continued until the early tenth century when it was replaced by the “early” royal court state. The early royal court state continued until 1040, when under the regency of Fujiwara no Yorimichi, another major change is instituted, which constitutes the “late” royal court state. That continues until replacement by the “medieval” state represented by the Kamakura bakufu.

### Statutory State Period, 784–902

This early period follows that explained in the Heian outline above. It places great emphasis upon the decision to move out of the Temmu-line stronghold of Nara to first Nagaoka, then Heian, both fully located within the Tenji-line of the imperial house represented by Kammu. The move of the capital is coupled with two important political changes. On the one hand, Kammu attempted to administer politics by firm control of the bureaucracy through the operation of the Grand Council of State (*Dajōkan*) within the palace. On the other hand, the noble class underwent something of a structural change, as some important clans of the Nara era fell in the late eighth century, to be replaced by newly risen clans employed by Kammu in the *sangi*, or imperial advisor, rank. For most of the Heian period, no more than ten clans played significant roles.

The primary weakening of the statutory state was, as noted above, the inability of the complex land distribution system based on censuses conducted every six years. The last year it was done on a nation-wide basis was in 800, after which it was conducted only periodically in various of the provinces. In short, the attempt of the

state to impose control over the populace through this complex census and tax system failed, although noble attempts were exerted to keep it alive throughout the ninth century, most notably by minister of the left Fujiwara no Tokihira in the early years of Emperor Daigo.

### Early Royal Court State, 902–1040

A major change in the state structure occurred with the failure of late ninth-century attempts to reinvigorate the *ritsuryō* system, when Tokihira's brother Fujiwara no Tadahira was minister of the left under Emperor Daigo. This change came in the way in which the state extracted taxes from the provincial populace for support of the court, and was significant enough to cause historians to recognize the existence of the *ōchō kokka*, or royal court state structure, in its early phase. Essentially, the state abandoned a hands-on approach to provincial rule, and instead effectively contracted out local administration to governors, now increasingly known by the term *zurō* or tax managers. In return for allowing the governors a free hand in the provinces, the state required a fixed amount of tax revenue to be forwarded to the capital. The state did not neglect the provinces, but in actuality the nobles did little more than debate issues submitted to them from the governors for review or decision.

Moreover, the state abandoned the regularized taxation of individuals in favor of taxing the land: it was “real” estate, immobile property, as opposed to unreliable individuals who fled in large numbers to avoid taxation. Lands were now formed into units called *myō*, which became the basic unit for the levying of all manner of taxes. Responsibility for collecting taxes levied on the unit was borne by one of the cultivators termed a *fumyō*, many of whom, through association with the land, later became *myōshu* or “holders of *myō*.” Provincial governors were then able to have a free hand in collecting local taxes and allocating corvée labor, as long as they forwarded to the central government the revenues assigned to their provinces. The state did not totally abandon the provinces; and if a major problem arose, central officials would be dispatched to investigate. In times of crisis, a centrally approved expeditionary force might be sent against an uprising.

This scenario alters somewhat our evaluation of the central nobility. Historians had long argued that the Heian nobility, represented by the Fujiwara regent's house, simply surrendered interest in government to concentrate more upon the proper execution of ritual and ceremony in accord with past precedent, which accounted for a decline in politics, which in turn led to the degeneration of local politics. Under the royal court state theory, however, it is argued that the nobility, by contracting out local administration, was able to maintain the state structure by lessening their administrative duties in comparison to the earlier age. But the court nobles, dominated in this age by Michinaga, and then Yorimichi, did not simply occupy themselves with what appears to moderns to be meaningless ritual. In the first place, in Heian society, the distinction between ritual and substance was not recognized, and the proper performance of actions was seen as crucial to successful policies. Second, Michinaga and the other nobles were intensely concerned with politics; and the zeal with which they addressed, for example, the appointment of governors, who guaranteed the flow of income from periphery to the center, was noteworthy.<sup>9</sup>

It was during this period, however, that conditions in the provinces deteriorated, as governors extracted excessive taxes from the peasantry; and powerful local notables, including governors, large-scale farmers, and members of the aristocracy collaborated to expand privately held *shōen* at the expense of publicly held (taxable) land. This was a more important development in the next period, and indeed a close reading of the diary of Fujiwara no Michinaga reveals little information about *shōen*. But the degree of local unrest and discontent was exemplified in this period by the outbreak of two major provincial uprisings in 939, Taira no Masakado in the east and Fujiwara no Sumitomo in the west. Still, the reorganized royal court state was able to subdue them through the appointment of court-appointed commanders leading private forces recruited as mercenaries in the service of the state from among men just like those who rose against the state.<sup>10</sup>

### Late Royal Court State, 1040–1185

The royal court theory recognizes Fujiwara no Yorimichi's regency as marking another change in the royal state, especially the numerous changes in administrative structures and systems at the local level. Rising members of the military class were appointed as heads of administrative units such as *gun*, *gō*, *ho*, and *mura*, which these local elites gradually turned into private holdings, or *shōen*, over the course of medieval times. The changes in the royal state are seen as commencing with the 1140 *shōen* regulation ordinance (*seiryōryō*), the first of a series of ordinances designed to confront the expansion of private estates.

An important step in this effort came during the reign of Go-Sanjō (1068–72), a rare emperor with no Fujiwara family connection, whose unavoidable enthronement (there were simply no male heirs to Fujiwara consorts at the time) caused the resignation of Yorimichi as chancellor in 1067. Among efforts to restore economic health, Go-Sanjō issued an edict in 1069 restricting severely the acquisition of estates by nobles and temple complexes. Moreover, he established the Records Office (*kirokujo*), which provided for the first time a mechanism for adjudicating the legality of holdings. Although it ceased to function shortly after Go-Sanjō's death, the Records Office was revived in 1111, and again in 1156, to serve as an organ of dispute settlement between provincial governors (representing the state) and local landholders. But more importantly, this office, "in its charge to regulate (systematize) the estates, . . . established a new syntax of landholding," which really amounted to the possibility of the estate system.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of the late royal court state period involved the three retired sovereigns Shirakawa, Toba, and Go-Shirakawa succeeding in reviving the imperial house as a private competitive source of power, with its own administrative apparatus (*in no chō*), its own retainers and clients, and its own portfolio of estate holdings. While the retired sovereigns did establish new offices and procedures, for the most part they succeeded in dominating the existing organs of state by turning many of the court officials into their clients, including the most powerful warrior house in the land, the Ise Taira. Japanese historians consistently refer to the retired sovereigns as ruling in a "despotic" fashion. In fact, however, they ruled with cooperation with the noble and warrior houses, and with considerable spiritual support from the major temples and shrines in the capital region.

What brought an end to the Heian period in the late royal court state era was a shift in the power structure, as Taira no Kiyomori, long a client in the service of Go-Shirakawa, tried to usurp power from the retired sovereign, most markedly in a major dismissal of anti-Taira courtiers among Go-Shirakawa's followers in 1177, and then in 1179, when he imprisoned Go-Shirakawa and forced the chancellor to resign. After that there was a short-lived Taira regime that dominated the court until anti-Taira elements, led by the forces under Minamoto no Yoritomo, toppled them at the Battle of Dannoura in 1185.

### The *Kemmon* Theory of Joint Rulership

Another important development in the way historians regard the Heian period, especially the last century and a half, is the theory of joint rulership espoused by the late Kuroda Toshio.<sup>12</sup> Kuroda's view is broader than just Heian, encompassing the state as organized from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries. Kuroda regarded the highest authority of the state as shared by three separate but mutually supporting power blocs, or *kemmon*, an abbreviated form of a term that crops up in Heian documents, *kemmon seika*, or "powerful houses and influential families." While historically this referred only to major court families, Kuroda appropriated it and expanded its meaning to include the three power blocs of late ancient and medieval times, the courtiers (*kuge*), the warriors (*buke*), and the major religious institutions (*jisha*).

Earlier, scholars had focused upon the "rise" of the warrior element in the mid- and late Heian period; and although aware of the important linkages, not only spiritual but also in terms of political and economic power, between major religious institutions and both the courtier and warrior orders, they had regarded the great temples separately. Kuroda's work was important because it integrated the religious establishment into the power structure in a more coherent way. There are some problems with Kuroda's analysis, as the religious institutions (primarily Kōfukuji, Enryakuji, and Kōyasan) lacked the same kind of organizing power as the noble families (court) and warriors (*bakufu*) and did not operate coherently as a single hierarchy, split as they were doctrinally.

Nonetheless, Kuroda argued that the great monasteries had themselves become "*kemmon*-ified" in terms of administrative structure and economic support. All three power blocs shared similar characteristics as elites: private administrative headquarters, edicts for transmitting internal orders, groups of loyal retainers, judicial self-rule within the order, and finally control over private estates. While there was competition among the three elite orders, there was overall a shared rulership, a mutual interdependence that normally overrode competition, as the three elites were "mutually dependent upon each other to maintain their status and wealth: one *kemmon* was never powerful enough to rule without the support of other elites."<sup>13</sup>

Kuroda thus slightly alters the view of Heian political development that had rather mechanically charted the development of courtier power that was then in medieval times replaced by warrior power. While there is no doubt that under the continuing supreme authority of the emperor, ultimate decision-making may have shifted from leading courtiers to warrior hegemony in late ancient and medieval Japan, no *kemmon*

was able to rule alone but depended rather upon the support of peers. Thus some scholars now stress the interrelationship between the various *kemmon* in the late Heian–Kamakura period: the Fujiwara family hardly disappeared when the retired sovereigns asserted power during this time, and both continued to share power even after the establishment of the Kamakura bakufu. Meanwhile, the great religious institutions continued to provide religious rituals and comfort for both courtier and warrior elites. It is in fact the continued importance of Heian institutions into the Kamakura era that has led some scholars to push forward the beginning of medieval Japan. Admittedly, few Japanese scholars have adopted outright the terminology of the *kemmon* theory, although their work shows reliance on Kuroda's ideas. In English-language studies, however, it has had an impact, most markedly on the work of Adolphson and Hurst.

### Western Scholarship

The study of Japanese history outside Japan has flourished in the past several decades, especially in the United States. (Few have contributed as much as the French scholar Francine Hérail, however.) Doctoral programs at private and public universities have expanded greatly, and few institutions are now without Japanese history courses. Universities and colleges with more than one Japanese historian are no longer uncommon. But the coverage of Japanese history is uneven, as even a quick glance at major bibliographic sources would reveal. There is an obvious imbalance of the modern over the premodern; but even within the premodern period there is likewise unevenness, with the Tokugawa period being the best studied. In fact, there are more English-language books on my shelf devoted to Tokugawa intellectual history than to all of Heian history. This is due to many factors, chief of which is probably the perceived relevance of the later eras to contemporary Japan; and indeed the greater availability of English-language monographs continues to attract more students. Sources likely play a factor: the greater amount of extant historical materials attracts researchers, and the difficulty of deciphering the classical language in the sources discourages would-be scholars of Heian Japan. As a result, there has been little addition to the body of literature in the past three or four decades.

While there is a Further Reading list at the end of this essay, a note about the progress of the study of Heian Japan is in order. There is no one-volume or single-author scholarly book on Heian history in English. There are only a handful that qualify as specifically Heian works: Robert Borgen's work on Sugawara no Michizane, Karl Friday's *Hired Swords*, G. Cameron Hurst's *Insei*, and Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince*. Several authors devote considerable attention to Heian in works that cover a longer time frame: Asakawa Kan'ichi's path-breaking *Land and Society in Medieval Japan*; Jeffrey Mass's first and last volumes on the founding of the Kamakura bakufu; two books by William Wayne Farris, one on *Population, Disease, and Land*, the other his *Heavenly Warriors*; Thomas Keirstead's *Geography of Power in Medieval Japan*; another by Friday on *Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan*; and Michael Adolphson's *Gates of Power*, the first work to deal with the role of the great temples in the Heian era.

Asakawa's collected essays are all pre-World War II, Morris's *Shining Prince* was first published in 1964, Mass's first bakufu volume was published in 1974, Hurst's volume dates to 1976, and Borgen's Michizane book dates back to 1986. The works by Farris and Friday on the Heian military were published in 1992, while Adolphson's volume came out in 2000.

There are of course a number of excellent articles in academic journals devoted to Heian, several of which (Kiley and McCullough) are of such importance that I have included them in the bibliography below. But the point here is to stress just how understudied the Heian period has been in the English-speaking world, indeed anywhere outside of Japan. There are now two indispensable compilations of essays that deal with aspects of Heian history. The old (1974) *Medieval Japan: Essays in Institutional History*, still used as a textbook in many premodern history courses, includes four essays totally devoted to the Heian era and two that touch on it. Currently, the most authoritative coverage of the Heian period is volume 2 in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, whose ten chapters are all devoted to Heian Japan. Although the Cambridge project dates back to the late 1970s – and, as I recall, all those years ago, the Heian conference at which first drafts of chapters were presented was the first to be held – volume 2 was the last to appear, in 1999.

Whereas other eras of Japanese history have been the subject of at least one, if not many conferences, resulting in the publication of excellent collections of essays by Japanese and Western authors in English (Muromachi, Kamakura, Sengoku, etc.), the Heian period was not the subject of a conference for a very long time. Only at length, in 2002, was there a two-day conference at Harvard University on “Centers and Peripheries in Heian Japan,” a monumental undertaking originally conceived and planned by a committee consisting of Mikael Adolphson (Harvard), G. Cameron Hurst III (Pennsylvania), Edward Kamens (Yale), Joan Piggott (then Cornell, now University of Southern California), and Mimi Yiengpruksawan (Yale). The conference was composed of five separate panels of three to four papers each, a total of sixteen papers on various aspects of Heian political, institutional, religious, literary, and artistic history. The focus was on the first three centuries of the era, especially the mid-Heian period, or what corresponds to the early royal court state. Each panel, indeed each paper, attempted to wrestle with the interplay between center and periphery in order to provide some balance to the previously overwhelming concentration upon central issues and institutions. Thus issues – such as cross-border traffic in Kyūshū, temple networks in the provinces, provincial rebellion, Chinese traders and their impact on the nobility, the life of commoners in the provinces, and Fujiwara no Michinaga's connection to provincial governors – were for the first time addressed by non-Japanese scholars, or by Japanese scholars in English. The forthcoming publication of this volume will certainly bring the study of the Heian period to a new level and hopefully attract the interest of future researchers.

Despite the importance of the Cambridge History volume and the forthcoming *Centers and Peripheries*, there is a great deal of work to do before English language coverage of the Heian period is fully adequate. Although it would be nonsensical even to suggest that the situation could ever approach the coverage Heian enjoys in Japan, still, non-Japanese works fall woefully behind not only in volume, but also in areas of coverage. Needless to say, interest in Heian political and economic institutions is far

less well developed than that in literature and art, and even Heian religion. Thus while we are still looking for adequate historical narratives, there are excellent translations into English of virtually all the major works of Heian literature (indeed, translations of *The Tale of Genji* compete with one another for course adoption!). Moreover there is a growing body of analytical studies of Heian literature, of more broadly textual studies, and of women's language. Scholars of Japanese religion have likewise continued to publish excellent monographs on great Heian religious leaders, the spread of newly introduced Tendai and Shingon, and translations of some of the most important Buddhist texts.

By comparison, there is not a single volume in English devoted, for example, to the Heian land system, despite the fact that it was in mid- and late Heian times that the vast *shōen* system really took shape. Arguably the most important economic institution of premodern Japan, with a history spanning the nine centuries from Nara to Sengoku, the *shōen* is the focus of only one full volume since Asakawa's time, the aforementioned work of Thomas Keirstead. As far as Heian estates are concerned, only the books by Farris, Hall, Hurst, Mass, and more recently Adolphson, have much to say on the subject. Two articles by Elizabeth Sato and Kiley (plus his magisterial, yet unpublished dissertation, on the subject) were all that was available until the two chapters by Kiley and Dana Morris in *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Compare this with the thousands of studies and collections of documents related to *shōen* in Japanese and one can see how limited has been research outside Japan on much other than the political and cultural life of the elite at the Heian court.

The Heian period thus remains a fertile ground for the scholar who wishes to leave his or her mark on Japanese historical studies.

#### NOTES

- 1 Shively and McCullough, "Introduction," in Shively and McCullough, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, *Heian Japan*, p. 1.
- 2 Mesheryakov, "On the Quantity of Written Data Produced by the *Ritsuryō* State," p. 193.
- 3 Toby, "Why Move Nara? Kammu and the Transfer of the Capital."
- 4 Hall, *Government and Local Power in Japan, 500–1700*, esp. pp. 99–128.
- 5 Farris, *Heavenly Warriors*.
- 6 Friday, *Hired Swords*.
- 7 Sakamoto's ideas can be found in any number of works. See, for example, *Nihon ōchō kokka taiseiron*; *Nihon no rekishi*, 8, *Ōchō kokka*; and *Shōensei seiritsu to ōchō kokka*.
- 8 Kiley, "Estate and Property in Late Heian Japan," p. 109.
- 9 Hurst, "*Kugyō* and *Zuryō*: Center and Periphery in the Age of Fujiwara no Michinaga." Paper presented at "Centers and Peripheries in Heian Japan," Harvard University, June 11, 2002 (to be published in forthcoming volume edited by Mikael Adolphson, *Centers and Peripheries in Heian Japan*).
- 10 Farris, *Heavenly Warriors*, pp. 131–59; Friday, *Hired Swords*, esp. pp. 144–7.
- 11 Keirstead, *The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan*, p. 19.
- 12 Kuroda's formulation of the *kemmon* idea appears in many of his works from the 1960s, but it is perhaps best summarized, in its impact on studies of Heian history, in Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, pp. 10–18.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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## FURTHER READING

There is not a great deal of material in English devoted to Heian history; a far greater amount is available on the literature and culture of the period. Among the books devoted solely or largely to covering Heian history are Mikael Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000); Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1986); William Wayne Farris, *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500–1300* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992); Karl Friday, *Hired Swords: The Rise of Private Warrior Power in Early Japan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); G. Cameron Hurst III, *Insei: Abdicated Sovereigns in the Politics of Late Heian Japan, 1086–1185* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); and Donald Shively and William McCullough, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, *Heian Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Although dealing with the Kamakura bakufu, two of Jeffrey Mass's works – *Warrior Government in Early Medieval Japan: A Study of the Kamakura Bakufu, Shugo, and Jitō* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) and *Yoritomo and the Founding of the First Bakufu* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999) – offer extensive coverage of late Heian history. Forthcoming from University of Hawai'i Press is Mikael Adolphson's edited volume *Centers and Peripheries in Heian Japan*, a book with contributions from American, Japanese, and European scholars that will join the Cambridge History in offering extensive coverage of the Heian period in English.

A number of excellent translations of Heian texts flesh out the offerings: Jennifer Brewster, trans., *Fujiwara no Nagako, the Emperor Horikawa Diary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1972); Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *Ōkagami, the Great Mirror: Fujiwara no Michinaga and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Helen and William McCullough, trans., *A Tale of Flowering Fortunes: Annals of Japanese Aristocratic Life in the Heian Period*, 2 vols. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1980); and Judith Rabinovitch, *Shōmonki: The Story of Masakado's Rebellion* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1986). These are only the most historically oriented of the Heian literary genre; much can of course be gleaned from the various translations of *The Tale of Genji*, Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, *Lady Murasaki's Diary*, and a number of other translations. Translations of several works written after the Heian period are useful in understanding late Heian political history: Helen McCullough, *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988); Minoru Tsunoda, *The Founding of the Kamakura Shogunate, 1180–1185: With Selected Translations from the Azuma Kagami* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); and William Wilson, trans., *Hōgen Monogatari: A Tale of the Disorder of Hōgen* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1971).