

Timeline of Events in Japan

500-1000 AD

Adapted from Heilbrunn Timeline of Art
History The Metropolitan Museum of Art

538 (552 according to an alternate tradition)

The king of the Korean kingdom of Paekche, an ardent Buddhist, sends a message to the Japanese emperor Kinmei (r. 532–71) describing the Buddhist faith as “most excellent” and urging him to embrace it. While this is the traditional account of the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, in actuality the Japanese court probably learned of the religion earlier from Korean and Chinese traders and immigrants.

593

Prince Shotoku (574–622) becomes regent for his niece, Empress Suiko (r. 592–628). During his regency, which lasts until 622, the prince institutes a number of important political and social reforms meant to centralize government control and strengthen imperial authority. A devout Buddhist, Shotoku passes an edict promoting the Buddhist faith and gives imperial support to the construction of several important temples.

600

Prince Shotoku sends the first official Japanese mission to China. Seven years later, another embassy carries a letter from Shotoku to the Chinese emperor, addressing the latter as the ruler of the “land of the setting sun,” and signed by the ruler of the “land of the rising sun.” This is the first known use of this phrase, which forms the base of the name Japan (the two characters used for Japan literally mean “sun” and “origin” and are pronounced Nihon or Nippon in modern Japanese, and Riben in Mandarin Chinese, source of the English name Japan).

ca. 607

The Buddhist temple Horyuji is established in the Asuka region. This monastic compound is Japan's earliest extant Buddhist temple and contains the world's oldest surviving wood structure. Housed in the temple are bronze statues of Buddhist deities attributed to the preeminent sculptor Tori Busshi, the first artist known in Japan by name.

646

The Taika Reform is issued by Emperor Kotoku (r. 645–54) to strengthen imperial political and economic authority while weakening the position of aristocratic families. Based on the Chinese system, all agricultural land becomes the property of the emperor and all inhabitants his subjects. A merit-based bureaucracy is established, and expanded in 701 by the Taiho Code, to govern the imperial domain.

701

Following Chinese precedent, the Gagakuryo (Bureau of Court Music) is formed. Numerous types of sacred and secular music and dance are performed at court, including compositions from China, Korea, Central Asia, and Japan.

710

The imperial headquarters are moved from Asuka to Nara, which becomes the country's first permanent capital. Built according to a grid pattern, Nara is modeled on the Tang Chinese capital Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), but without city walls and gates. Efforts to establish Buddhism as the official state religion inspires the construction of many Buddhist temples within city limits.

712

Japan's first history and oldest surviving literary work, the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Times), is completed using Chinese script. This imperially commissioned collection of ancient songs, legends, genealogies, and descriptions of religious rites chronicles Japan's development from its creation to approximately 500 A.D. It is expanded by the Nihon shoki (History of Japan), which is completed in 720.

ca. 728

Emperor Shomu establishes an official scriptorium within the grounds of the imperial palace. The scribes who work in this bureau, along with supervisors, paper mounters, and assistants, are chosen by means of an arduous examination process, which tests a candidate's knowledge of Chinese characters and ability to write in regular script calligraphy. Like the officially sponsored scriptoria in major temples in Nara, the primary task of the court scriptorium at this time seems to be to provide temples with copies of Buddhist texts.

794

The capital moves to Heian-kyo (present-day Kyoto), “Capital of Peace and Tranquility,” beginning the Heian period. Kyoto remains the imperial seat until 1868. Like Nara, it was laid out according to a grid pattern, following the Chinese precedent. Kyoto remained the nation’s capital, albeit at times in name only, until 1867.

804

The Buddhist monk Saicho is sent to China on an official mission. Upon his return, Saicho introduces the Tendai school, which is centered around the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. After returning from the same mission to China, the monk Kukai (posthumous title, Kobo Daishi, 774–835) introduces Shingon Buddhism. Shingon emphasizes the use of elaborate rituals, appeals for help to a large pantheon of deities, and practices secret incantations to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime.

815

According to legend, Emperor Saga (r. 809–23) is the first Japanese sovereign to drink tea, imported from China by monks. The upper classes adopt this beverage for medicinal uses until the twelfth century, when it becomes associated with Zen Buddhist practice.