Early Japan was unified by a noble family that gave rise to a line of emperors. Over time, power passed from the hands of the emperor to powerful aristocratic families and then to military leaders called shoguns. Finally, centralized power in Japan disappeared altogether. Korea’s history during this period is one of a struggle for independence against the neighboring Chinese.  

**Guiding Question** How did Japan’s geography affect its economy and culture? What influenced the rise and fall of central rule in medieval Japan?

Japan’s history has been marked by power struggles between rulers and independent families. Geography has also played an important role in the development of Japanese history.

Chinese and Japanese societies have historically been very different. One of the reasons for these differences is geography. Whereas China is located on a vast continent, Japan is a mountainous archipelago, or chain of many islands. The population is concentrated on four main islands: Hokkaidō, the main island of Honshū, and the two smaller islands of Kyūshū and Shikoku. Japan’s total land area is approximately 146,000 square miles (378,000 square km)—about the size of Montana.

Like China, much of Japan is mountainous. Only about 11 percent of the total land area can be farmed. The mountains are volcanic in origin. Volcanic soils are very fertile, which has helped Japanese farming. The area, however, is prone to earthquakes. In 1923 an earthquake nearly destroyed the entire city of Tokyo.

The fact that Japan is an island nation has also affected its history. Because of their geographical isolation, the Japanese developed a number of unique qualities. These qualities contributed to the Japanese belief that they had a destiny separate from that of the peoples on the continent.

The ancestors of present-day Japanese settled in the Yamato Plain near the location of the modern cities of Ōsaka and Kyōto in the first centuries A.D. Their society was made up of clans. The people were divided between a small aristocratic class (the rulers) and a large population of rice farmers, artisans, and household servants. The local ruler of each clan protected the people in return for a share of the annual harvest. Eventually, one ruler of the Yamato clan (named for the Yamato Plain) achieved supremacy over the others and became, in effect, ruler of Japan.

In the early seventh century, Shōtoku Taishi, a Yamato prince, tried to unify the various clans so that the Japanese could more effectively resist invasion by the Chinese. To do this, Prince Shōtoku sent representatives to the Tang capital of China to learn how the Chinese organized their government. He then began to create a centralized system of government, based roughly on the Chinese model.

Prince Shōtoku wanted a centralized government under a supreme ruler. His objective was to limit the powers of the aristocrats and enhance the Yamato ruler’s (his own) authority. Thus, the ruler was portrayed as a divine figure and the symbol of the Japanese nation.

Shōtoku Taishi’s successors continued to make reforms based on the Chinese model. The territory of Japan was divided into administrative districts, and the senior official of each district was selected from among the local nobles. As in China, the rural village was the basic unit of government. A new tax system was set up. Now all farmland technically belonged to the state. All taxes were to be paid directly to the central government rather than to local aristocrats.

**The Nara Period**

After Shōtoku Taishi’s death in 622, political power fell into the hands of the Fujiwara clan. A Yamato ruler was still emperor. He was, however, strongly influenced by the Fujiwara family. In 710 a new capital was established at Nara. The emperor now used the title “Son of Heaven.”

Though the reforms begun by Prince Shōtoku continued during this period, Japan’s central government could not overcome the power of the aristocrats. These powerful families were able to keep the taxes from the lands for themselves. Unable to gain tax revenues, the central government steadily lost power and influence.

**The Heian Period**

In 794 the emperor moved the capital from Nara to nearby Heian-kyo, on the site of present-day Kyōto. The emperor continued to rule in name, but actual power remained in the hands of the Fujiwara clan. In fact, the government was returning to the decentralized system that had existed before the time of Shōtoku Taishi. Powerful families whose wealth was based on the ownership of tax-exempt farmland dominated the rural areas.

With the decline of central power, local aristocrats took justice into their own hands. They turned to military force, and a new class of military servants emerged whose purpose was to protect the security and property of their employers. Called the samurai (“those who serve”), these warriors fought on horseback, clad in helmet and armor, and carried a sword and a bow. Like knights in Europe, the samurai were supposed to live by a strict warrior code, known in Japan as Bushido (“the way of the warrior”).

**The Kamakura Shogunate**

By the end of the twelfth century, rivalries among Japanese aristocratic families had led to almost constant civil war. Finally, a powerful noble named Minamoto Yoritomo defeated several rivals and set up his power near the modern city of Tokyo.
To strengthen the state, he created a more centralized government under a military leader known as the shogun (general). In this new system—called the shogunate—the emperor remained ruler in name only, and the shogun exercised the actual power. The Kamakura shogunate, founded by Yoritomo, lasted from 1192 to 1333.

Although the shogunate was a military government, it was unprepared when Mongol ruler Kublai Khan sent 23,000 troops to invade Japan in 1274. The Mongols were winning until a storm sank their fleet. In 1281, Kublai Khan sent nearly 150,000 troops. Fighting from behind stone walls they had built, the Japanese forced the Mongols to retreat. A typhoon (violent storm) then devastated the Mongol fleet. The wars strained the political system. In 1333, several powerful families overthrew the Kamakura shogunate.

Feudalism in Japan: Collapse of Central Rule

In circumstances similar to those of European feudalism during the Middle Ages, the power of local aristocrats grew during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Japan. Heads of noble families, now called daimyo (DY • mee • oh), or "great names," controlled vast landed estates that owed no taxes to the government. As family rivalries continued, the daimyo relied on the samurai for protection, much like European lords relied on knights. Political power came into the hands of a loose coalition of noble families.

By 1500, Japan was close to chaos. A disastrous civil war known as the Onin War (1467–1477) led to the virtual destruction of the capital city of Kyōto. Central authority disappeared. Powerful aristocrats in rural areas seized control over large territories, which they ruled as independent lords. Their rivalries caused almost constant warfare.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Summarizing At the conclusion of the twelfth century, what ended Japan’s civil war?

Life in Early Japan

GUIDING QUESTION What was life like in early Japan?

Early Japan was mostly a farming society. Its people took advantage of the limited amount of farmland and abundant rainfall to grow wet rice. Trade in Japan was slow to develop. Barter was used until the twelfth century.

Manufacturing began to develop during the Kamakura period. Markets appeared in large towns, and industries such as the making of paper and porcelain emerged. Trade between regions also grew. Goods were carried in carts, on boats, or on human backs. Foreign trade, mainly with Korea and China, began during the eleventh century. Japan shipped raw materials, paintings, swords, and other manufactured items in return for silk, porcelain, books, and copper coins.

The Role of Women

In early Japan, women may have had a certain level of equality with men. An eighth-century law code, for example, guaranteed the inheritance rights of women. In addition, wives who were abandoned could divorce and remarry. Later practices, however, show that women were considered to be subordinate to men. A husband could divorce his wife if she did not produce a son or if she committed adultery, talked too much, was jealous, or had a serious illness.

Although women did not possess the full legal and social rights of men, they played an active role at various levels of society. Aristocratic women were prominent at court. Some became known for their artistic or literary talents. Women often appear in the paintings of the period along with men. The women are doing the spring planting, threshing and hulling rice, and acting as salespersons and entertainers.

Religion and Culture

Early Japanese people worshiped spirits, called kami, whom they believed resided in trees, rivers, and mountains. The Japanese also believed that the spirits of their ancestors were present in the air and in natural formations such as rocks. In Japan, these beliefs evolved into a religion called Shinto ("the Sacred Way" or "the Way of the Gods"), which is still practiced today. Over time, Shinto became a state doctrine linked to a belief in the divinity of the emperor and the sacredness of the Japanese nation.

Shinto, however, did not satisfy the spiritual needs of all the Japanese people. Some turned to Buddhism, which Buddhist monks from China brought to Japan during the A.D. 500s. Among the aristocrats in Japan, one sect, known as Zen, became the most popular. Zen beliefs about self-discipline became part of the samurai warrior’s code. The two main schools of Zen teach that nirvana either comes by instantaneous enlightenment or through a long process of meditation.

During much of the history of early Japan, aristocratic men believed that prose fiction was merely "vulgar gossip" and was thus beneath them. Consequently, from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, women were the most productive writers of prose fiction in Japanese. From this tradition appeared one of the world's great novels, The Tale of Genji. Written by an author in the emperor’s court named Murasaki Shikibu. Her novel traces the life of fictional nobleman Genji, a son of the emperor, as he moves from youthful adventures to a life of compassion in his later years. Its spiritual and aristocratic themes appealed to many readers in Japan during this period. Another author, an aristocratic woman, Sei Shonagon, also wrote The Pillow Book, which told of her activities as a court lady.

In Japanese art and architecture, landscape serves as an important means of expression. The landscape surrounding the Golden Pavilion in Kyōto displays a harmony of garden, water, and architecture.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Determining Importance Why were Shinto and Buddhism important to the development of Japanese culture?
Connections to TODAY

Genji in Modern Japanese Culture

Over the ten centuries since it was written, The Tale of Genji has had a huge impact on Japanese culture. In Japanese fine arts in recent years, Lady Murasaki's novel has inspired a modern-dance adaptation, a symphony, and an opera. Popular culture treatments of Genji include several film versions, a television series, mangas (comic book) adaptations aimed at different audiences, video games, and even a robot. Robotic specialists at Kyoto University created a kimono-clad robotic figure of Lady Murasaki with a built-in MP3 player that plays The Tale of Genji.

The Emergence of Korea

GUIDING QUESTION How was Korea influenced by China and Japan?

The Korea Peninsula, only slightly larger than the state of Minnesota, is relatively mountainous. Its closeness to both China and Japan has greatly affected its history. Indeed, no society in East Asia was more strongly influenced by the Chinese model than Korea.

In 109 B.C., the northern part of the Korea Peninsula came under Chinese control. The Koreans, however, drove them out in the A.D. 200s. Eventually, three separate kingdoms emerged: Koguryo in the north, Paekche (PAK • chuh) in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast. Each of the kingdoms was governed by the combination of a hereditary monarch and powerful aristocratic families. From the fourth to the seventh centuries, the three kingdoms were bitter rivals. In this period Buddhism was introduced to Korea. It quickly became the state religion of each kingdom. After 527, Silla kings adopted Buddhist names and sponsored the building of many Buddhist temples. As the Silla kingdom became more allied with the Chinese, the monarchy turned to Confucian ideals to run the country.

Gradually, with the support of the Tang dynasty of China, the kingdom of Silla gained control of the peninsula. After the king of Silla was assassinated, Korea sank into civil war. Finally, in the early tenth century, a new dynasty called Koryo (the root of the modern word Korea) arose in the north. This kingdom adopted Chinese political institutions in order to unify its territory and remained in power for four hundred years.

In the thirteenth century, the Mongols seized the northern part of Korea. By accepting Mongol authority, the Koryo dynasty managed to remain in power. Mongol rule led to much suffering for the Korean people, especially the thousands of peasants and artisans who were forced to build ships for Kublai Khan's invasion of Japan. After the collapse of the Mongol dynasty in China, the Koryo dynasty broke down.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying How did the kingdom of Silla gain control of the Korean peninsula?

Reviewing Vocabulary

1. Identifying What did Bushido mean to the samurai?

Using Your Notes

2. Categorizing Use your notes to identify the characteristics of life in early Japan.

Answering the Guiding Questions

3. Drawing Conclusions How did Japan's geography affect its economy and culture?

4. Evaluating What influenced the rise and fall of central rule in medieval Japan?

5. Describing What was life like in early Japan?

6. Analyzing How was Korea influenced by China and Japan?
Writing Activity

7. Informative/Explanatory Write an essay describing how China influenced the culture, religion, economy, and governments of Japan and Korea.