

JAPANESE ART

The Nara period (710–784)

Beginning of the imperial state

In 710 the imperial capital was shifted a short distance from Asuka to Nara. For the next 75 years, with minor gaps, Nara was the seat of government, and the old custom of changing the capital with each successive emperor was finally discarded. During this period, the centralized government provided for under the ritsuryō structure worked reasonably well; it was a time of atypical social mobility based on merit, where those with Chinese learning or Buddhist knowledge enjoyed access to power. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature is the brilliant flowering of culture, especially Buddhist culture. The leaders in its promotion were the emperor Shōmu and his consort, Kōmyō. Immediately on his accession, Shōmu—who from childhood had been given a thorough schooling as future emperor—showed an eager concern to promote the stable livelihood of the people. Convinced that the Buddhist faith was a means to ensure both the happiness of the individual and peace for the country as a whole, he introduced strong doses of Buddhism into his government.

One of the measures he took was the founding of the provincial temples known as kokubunji. Each province was to build a monastery (kokubunji) and a nunnery (kokubun niji), each with a seven-story pagoda and each housing a statue of the Shakyamuni Buddha. Each monastery was to have 20 monks, each nunnery 10 nuns, whose constant task would be to recite the scriptures and offer up prayers for the welfare of the nation. Just as the temporal world had its kokushi (governors) in each province to attend to its administrative and juridical matters, so the spiritual world would have officially appointed monks and nuns, distributed evenly among the provinces, to attend to the spiritual needs of the people.

The second measure taken by Shōmu was the construction of the Tōdai Temple as kokubunji of the capital and the installation within it of a huge bronze figure of the Vairocana Buddha as supreme guardian deity of the nation. The casting of the Great Buddha (Daibutsu) was a tremendously difficult task, but the emperor called on the people at large to contribute to the project, in however humble a way, and thereby partake of the grace of the Buddha. The great image that was produced as a result, though damaged in later ages, still stands in the Tōdai Temple and is famous the world over as the Great Buddha of Nara. The court also tried to attract Chinese monks to Nara. The most important of these was Ganjin (Chinese: Jianzhen), who finally reached Nara in 753 on his sixth attempt and founded the Ritsu sect at Tōshōdai Temple.

Great Buddha Hall

Great Buddha Hall

Great Buddha Hall (Daibutsu-den) of the Tōdai Temple, Nara, Japan. The original Late Nara building was completed in 752; the present hall is an 18th-century reconstruction.

Orion Press—Scala/Art Resource, New York

Shūkongōjin

Shūkongōjin

Shūkongōjin, painted clay, 733; in the Hekkedō (Sangatsudō), Tōdai Temple, Nara, Japan. Height 1.739 metres.

Sakamoto Photo Laboratory, Tokyo

The marriage of Buddhism and politics that was Shōmu's ideal was to cause trouble after his death. The temples gradually amassed vast wealth, and the monks acquired high political positions and began to interfere in secular affairs. A movement to counter such abuses arose among the aristocracy, the leaders of the movement being the Fujiwara family, descendants of Nakatomi Kamatari, who had played an important role in the Taika reforms. Kamatari and his son Fuhito (both later given the surname Fujiwara) had supervised compilation of the Taihō and Yōrō codes that formalized the ritsuryō system and had become prominent figures at court as a new type of bureaucrat-noble. Moreover, Shōmu's marriage to Fuhito's second daughter (who became known as the empress Kōmyō) created the precedent for a marital relationship with the imperial house that was to last throughout much of premodern Japanese history. The subsequent progress of the family's fortunes in the Nara period was not always smooth, however.

In particular, the emphasis on Buddhism undercut the family's influence. At the end of the 8th century, the powerful priest-premier Dōkyō rose to a position of undisputed hegemony under Shōmu's daughter, who reigned twice, as the empress Kōken and then as Shōtoku; and Fujiwara nobles feared that the priestly domination of government threatened the future of the nation. Ousting Dōkyō following the death of the empress, they set on the throne a new emperor, Kōnin, who was less enthralled with Buddhism. Kōnin's son, the emperor Kammu, who was of a similar mind, shifted the capital first to Nagaoka and in 794 to Heian (or Heian-kyō; present Kyōto) to sever connections with the temples of Nara and reestablished government in accordance with the ritsuryō system. Kammu's accession

also represented a shift from the descendants of the emperor Temmu back to those of Tenji, whose base of power was located in Yamashiro province, the site of the new capital.

Culture in the Nara period

The cultural flowering centring on Buddhism was an outcome of lively exchanges with other nations. Four times within 70 years the government sent official missions to the Tang court, each mission accompanied by a large number of students who went to study in China. By this time Tang had formed a great empire that controlled not only the central plains of China but parts of Mongolia and Siberia to the north and of Central Asia to the west.

Nara culture, borrowing from the Tang, whose capital, Chang'an, was a great international city, evinced a marked international flavour itself. The consecration ceremony of the Great Buddha of Tōdai Temple, for example, was conducted by a Brahman high priest born in India, while the music was played by musicians from throughout East Asia.

But despite this internationalism, respect was also shown for traditional Japanese cultural forms. An outstanding example of this respect is the collection of Japanese verse known as *Man'yōshū* (c. 8th century CE), an anthology of 4,500 poems both ancient and contemporary. Poets represented in the anthology range over all classes of society, from the emperor and members of the imperial family through the aristocracy and the priesthood to farmers, soldiers, and prostitutes; and the scenery celebrated in the verse represents districts throughout the country. The poems deal directly and powerfully with basic human themes, such as love between men and women or between parents and children, and are deeply imbued with the traditional spirit of Japan, scarcely influenced at all by Buddhist or Confucian ideas. The anthology had immense influence on all subsequent Japanese culture.

The compilation of Japan's two most ancient histories, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, also took place at the beginning of the 8th century. Both works are extremely important, for they draw on oral or written traditions handed down from much earlier times. The histories—a combination of myth, folk belief, and, as they near the contemporary age, historical fact—were highly political in nature: by stressing the connection between the imperial family and the sun goddess (*Amaterasu*), they provided a written legitimation of the rule of the imperial house. By purposely dating Japanese history back as far as 660 BCE, the compilers sought to raise the level of national sophistication in Chinese and Korean eyes.

The Heian period (794–1185)

Changes in ritsuryō government

In 794, as noted above, the emperor Kammu shifted his capital to Heian, diluted the ties between government and Buddhism, and attempted to revive government in accordance with the ritsuryō. Commanding that the provisions of the ritsuryō system be enforced, he also amended those articles that were no longer relevant to the age. Since it was difficult in practice to carry out the allocation of rice fields once every 6 years, this was amended to once in 12 years. A tighter watch was imposed on corruption among local officials. The original system of raising conscript troops from among the peasantry was abolished, and soldiers were thenceforth selected from among the sons of local officials with martial prowess. Kammu, continuing campaigns that had plagued the regime since Nara times, dispatched large conscript armies against the Ezo (*Emishi*), a nonsubject tribal group in the northern districts of Honshu who were regarded as aliens. The Ezo eventually were pacified, although the northern border was never fully brought under the control of the central government. Those Ezo who submitted to government forces were resettled throughout the empire and largely assimilated into the existing population.

Interference in affairs of state by religious authorities was forbidden, but they were encouraged to see that Buddhism fulfilled its proper functions. Kammu was a supporter of Buddhism for both national and individual purposes. He dispatched two brilliant monks, Saichō and Kūkai, to China to study. Each of them, on his return to Japan, established a new sect of Japanese Buddhism: the Tendai sect, founded by Saichō, and the Shingon sect, established by Kūkai. In the Nara period, Buddhism had been no more than a transplantation of the Buddhism of Tang China, but the two new sects, though derived from China, developed in a characteristically Japanese fashion. As headquarters of their new sects, Saichō and Kūkai founded, respectively, the Enryaku Temple on Mount Hiei and the Kongōbu Temple on Mount Kōya. The two sects were thenceforth to form the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism.

After Kammu, successive emperors carried on his policies, and society enjoyed some 150 years of peace. The formal aspects of government, at least, were carefully observed, and the supplementing of the legal codes, the

compilation of histories, and the minting of coins all took place frequently in accordance with precedent. The social reality, however, became increasingly chaotic, and form and actuality were soon traveling along quite different courses. The very foundations of ritsuryō government began to crumble because of the difficulty of carrying out the allotment system based on census registers and the consequent decline in government revenue. Two changes were instituted early in the 10th century that, while temporarily shoring up government finances, eventually led to further erosion of the ideals of the authority-intensive ritsuryō system. First, the state decided to calculate taxes on the basis of land units rather than individuals. The government set up taxation units based on paddy fields upon which both rent and corvée could easily be assessed. Second, the central government gave up the details of administering provincial affairs, leaving local matters to governors (now increasingly called zuryō, or “tax managers”) and local resident officials (zaichō kanjin) who were mainly responsible for forwarding to Heian a specified tax amount. It now became easier to calculate the amount of taxable public land (kōden) in each province, but entrusting so much authority to governors opened the gates for further abuse, especially the possibilities of increasing the amount of lands held in tax-free estates. Thus, the reality of Heian society continued to deviate from the ritsuryō ideal.

Another example of the divergence between form and reality is the fact that while, on the surface, appointments to official posts were made in accord with ritsuryō stipulations, real power shifted to other posts that were newly created outside the codes as the occasion demanded. Early examples were the two new posts created during the early 9th century: kurōdo, a kind of secretary and archivist to the emperor, and kebiishi, the imperial police, who ultimately developed powers to investigate crimes and determine punishments. The two most important posts developed outside the ritsuryō codes were those of sesshō (regent) and kampaku (chief councillor), better known by an abbreviated combination of the two terms, sekkan (regency). The original role of the sesshō was to attend to affairs of state during the minority of the emperor, whereas the kampaku’s role was to attend to state matters for the emperor even after he had come of age. Neither post had been foreseen by the ritsuryō system, which was based on the principle of direct rule by the emperor.

Prior to the early Heian period, all sovereigns had been adults, and seemingly no one had envisioned the enthronement of a child emperor. In the mid-9th century, however, when nine-year-old Seiwa ascended the throne, his maternal grandfather, Fujiwara Yoshifusa, created the office of sesshō, based on the post once held by imperial family members such as the empress Jingū and the princes Nakano Ōe and Shōtoku. Yoshifusa’s son Mototsune became sesshō during the minority of the succeeding emperor Yōzei, and then in the reign of the emperor Uda, he created the post of kampaku. It thus became the established custom that a member of the Fujiwara family should serve as sesshō and kampaku. In order to hold the sekkan offices, it was necessary that the person concerned should marry his daughter into the imperial family and then establish the resulting offspring as emperor. In other words, the indispensable qualification was that one should be the emperor’s maternal grandfather or father-in-law. While not totally new with the Fujiwara—the maternal relatives of the early Yamato rulers (notably the Soga) were the important powers at court—the system reached its height and perfection under the Fujiwara. As a result of this complex system, there were constant struggles at court involving the expulsion of members of other families by the Fujiwara family or wrangling among the branches of the extensive Fujiwara clan itself.

One of the most celebrated affairs involving the expulsion of a member of another family by the Fujiwara was the removal of Sugawara Michizane from his post as minister and his exile to Kyushu. Born into a family of scholars, Michizane was an outstanding scholar whose ability in writing Chinese verse and prose was said to rival that of the Chinese themselves. Recognizing his talent, the emperor Uda singled Michizane out for an attempt to break the authority of the Fujiwara family, to whom the emperor had no connection. Uda appointed Michizane and Fujiwara Tokihira to a succession of government posts. In 899 Uda’s successor, the emperor Daigo, simultaneously appointed Tokihira and Michizane as his two top ministers. In 901 Tokihira, jealous of Michizane’s influence, falsely reported to Daigo (who was sympathetic to the Fujiwara) that Michizane was plotting treason. Michizane was demoted to a ministerial post in Kyushu, effectively sending him and his family into exile.

The culture of the 9th century was a continuation of that of the 8th, insofar as its foundations were predominantly Chinese. The writing of Chinese prose and verse was popular among scholars, and great respect for Chinese customs was shown in the daily lives of the aristocracy. Buddhist monks continued to travel to China to bring back as-yet-unknown scriptures and iconographic pictures. Buddhist sculpture and paintings produced in Japan were done in the Tang style. At the end of the 9th century, however, Japan cut off formal relations with Tang China, both because of the expense involved in sending regular envoys and because of the political unrest accompanying the breakup of the Tang empire. In fact, the Japanese court no longer had a model worthy of emulation, nor did it need

one. The practical result was the stimulation of a more purely Japanese cultural tradition. Japanese touches were gradually added to the basically Tang styles, and a new culture slowly came into being, but it was not until the 10th century and later that this tendency became a strong current.

Aristocratic government at its peak

From the 10th century and through the 11th, successive generations of the northern branch of the Fujiwara clan continued to control the nation's government by monopolizing the posts of *sesshō* and *kampaku*, and the wealth that poured into their coffers enabled them to lead lives of the greatest brilliance. The high-water mark was reached in the time of Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1028). Four of his daughters became consorts of four successive emperors, and three of their sons became emperors. Government during this period was based mostly on precedent, and the court had become little more than a centre for highly ritualized ceremonies.

Sōtatsu: *Genji monogatari*: Miotsukushi

Sōtatsu: *Genji monogatari*: Miotsukushi

Genji monogatari: Miotsukushi, centre detail of left screen of a pair of sixfold screens by Sōtatsu, colour on gold-leafed paper; in the Seikado Bunko Art Museum, Tokyo.

The Seikado Bunko Art Museum, Tokyo

The *ritsuryō* system of public ownership of land and people survived in name alone; land passed into private hands, and people became private citizens. The fiscal changes of the early 10th century did not bring enough paddy fields into production, and tax rates remained high. Public revenue—the income of the Heian aristocrats—continued to decline, and the incentive to seek new private lands increased. Privately owned lands were known as *shōen* (“manors”), which developed primarily on the basis of rice fields under cultivation since the adoption of the *ritsuryō* system. Since the government-encouraged opening up of new land during the Nara period, temples and aristocrats with resources at their disposal had hastened to develop new areas, and vast private lands had accrued to them. Originally, private lands had been taxable, but *shōen* owners developed various techniques to obtain special exemption from taxes, so by mid-Heian times the *shōen* had gradually become nontaxable estates. The increase in *shōen* thus came to pose a serious threat to the government, which accordingly issued edicts intended to check the formation of new estates. This merely served, however, to establish more firmly the position of those already existing and failed to halt the tendency for such land to increase. Finally, an edict issued in 1069 recognized all estates established before 1045 and set up an office to investigate *shōen* records, thus legitimizing the accumulation of private estates. Since the owners of the *shōen* were the same high officials that constituted the government, it was extremely difficult to change the situation.

Although the aristocracy and temples around the capital enjoyed exemption from taxes on their private lands, the same privileges were not available to powerful families in the provinces. These, accordingly, commended their holdings to members of the imperial family or the aristocracy, concluding agreements with them that the latter should become owners in name while the former retained rights as actual administrators of the property. Thanks to such agreements, the estates of the aristocracy increased steadily, and their incomes swelled proportionately. The *shōen* of the Fujiwara family expanded greatly, especially in the 11th and 12th centuries.

While the aristocracy was leading a life of luxury on the proceeds from its estates, the first stirrings of a new power in the land—the warrior, or *samurai*, class—were taking place in the provinces. Younger members of the imperial family and lower-ranking aristocrats dissatisfied with the Fujiwara monopoly of high government offices would take up posts as local officials in the provinces, where they settled permanently, acquired lands of their own, and established their own power. In order to protect their territories or expand their power, they began to organize local inhabitants (especially the *zaichō kanjin*) into service. Since many of these local officials had for centuries practiced martial skills, a number of powerful provincial aristocrats developed significant armed forces. As a consequence, when such men of true martial ability and sufficient autonomy emerged, the slightest incident involving any one of them might provoke armed conflict. The risings of Taira Masakado (d. 940) in the Kantō district and of Fujiwara Sumitomo (d. 941) in western Japan are examples of large war bands extending their control in the provinces; for a time, Masakado controlled as many as seven provinces. Although the government was able to suppress the rebellions, these conflicts had an enormous effect in lowering the government's prestige and encouraging the desolation of the provinces.

During the 10th century a truly Japanese culture developed, one of the most important contributing factors being the emergence of indigenous scripts, the *kana* syllabaries. Until then, Japan had no writing of its own; Chinese

ideographs were used both for their meaning and for their pronunciation in order to represent the Japanese language, which was entirely different grammatically from Chinese. Educated men and women of the day, however, gradually evolved a system of writing that used a purely phonetic, syllabic script formed by simplifying a certain number of the Chinese characters; another script was created by abbreviating Chinese characters. These two scripts, called hiragana and katakana, respectively, made it possible to write the national language with complete freedom, and their invention was an epochal event in the history of the expression of ideas in Japan. Thanks to the kana, a great amount of verse and prose in Japanese was to be produced.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect were the daughters of the Fujiwara family, who, under the aristocratic government of the day, became the consorts of successive emperors and surrounded themselves with talented women who vied with each other in learning and the ability to produce fine writing. The hiragana script—largely shunned by men, who composed official documents in stilted Chinese—provided such women with an opportunity to create works of literature. Among such works, *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), a novel by Murasaki Shikibu, and *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (*Makura no sōshi*), a collection of vivid scenes and incidents of court life by Sei Shōnagon, who was a lady-in-waiting to the empress Sadako, are masterpieces of world literature.

By Heian times, the diverse poetic forms found in the *Man'yōshū* had been refined into one form called *waka*. The *waka*, consisting of 31 syllables, was an indispensable part of the daily lives of the aristocracy, and proficiency in verse making was counted an essential accomplishment for a courtier. The value placed on the skillful composition of poetry led to the compilation in 905 of the *Kokinshū* (or *Kokin wakashū*), the first of a series of anthologies of verse made at imperial command. So popular was the craze for composition that formal and informal poetic competitions were common among the aristocracy; careers and even love affairs depended on one's skill at versification.

The same trend toward the development of purely Japanese qualities became strongly marked in Buddhism as well. Both the Tendai and Shingon sects produced a succession of gifted monks and continued, as sects, to flourish. But, being closely connected with the court and aristocracy, they tended to pursue worldly wealth and riches at the expense of purely religious goals, and it was left to the Pure Land (*Jōdo*) sect of Buddhism to preach a religion that sought to arouse a desire for salvation in ordinary people.

Pure Land Buddhism, which became a distinct sect only in the 12th and 13th centuries, expounded the glories of the paradise of Amida (*Amitābha*, or Buddha of Infinite Light)—the world after death—and urged all to renounce the defilements of the present world for the sake of rebirth in that paradise; it seemed to offer an ideal hope of salvation in the midst of the disorder and decay of the old order. It grew in popularity as society began to unravel and violence spread at the end of the Heian period. Pure Land religion was very approachable in that it eschewed difficult theories and ascetic practices, teaching that in order to achieve rebirth it was necessary only to invoke the name of Amida and dwell on the marks of his divinity. This same teaching also inspired artists to produce an astonishing number of representations of Amida in both sculpture and painting. The mildness of his countenance and the softly curving folds of his robe contrasted strongly with the grotesque Buddhist sculpture in the preceding age and represented a much more truly Japanese taste.

Another example of this Japanization of culture is the style called *Yamato-e* ("Japanese painting"). Most *Yamato-e* dealt with secular affairs—for example, the career of Sugawara Michizane or *The Tale of Genji*—and there were even satirical works lampooning the behaviour of the court nobles. The signs of the growing independence of Japanese culture, apparent in every field, were an indication that by now, two centuries after the first ingestion of continental culture, the process of naturalization was nearing completion.

Government by cloistered emperors

The powerful authority wielded by the Fujiwara regents was maintained by their maternal relationship to successive emperors; once such a relationship disappeared, their power was bound to weaken. This is, in fact, what happened in late Heian times. The emperor Go-Sanjō ascended the throne in 1068, the first sovereign in more than a century not born of a daughter of the Fujiwara; while Michinaga's sons Yorimichi and Norimichi both gave their daughters to be imperial consorts, no Fujiwara-related heirs resulted from these unions. As a result, the adult Go-Sanjō, who had prepared assiduously for ruling, began to rule free of the strong control of a Fujiwara regent. His policies, such as the *shōen* regulation edict, were designed both to strengthen the weakening economic institutions of the state and to bolster the fortunes of the imperial family itself.

After only four years on the throne, Go-Sanjō abdicated and, in accord with the precedent established by earlier emperors, opened an office of the retired emperor (in no chō). Since Go-Sanjō clearly meant to participate in politics even from retirement, especially to direct the imperial succession to his non-Fujiwara sons, his era is often regarded as the institutionalization of rule by retired or cloistered emperors.

Go-Sanjō died shortly after abdicating, but he was followed by three successive rulers—Shirakawa, Toba, and Go-Shirakawa—who exercised sovereign power both as emperors and then even more effectively as retired emperors. Governmental control in Japan thus passed from Fujiwara regents to the “cloistered emperors” who wielded real power behind the scenes during the late 11th and 12th centuries. This system, known as *insei* (“cloistered government”) because the retired emperors all took Buddhist vows and retired to cloisters (in), was not dramatically different from the manner in which Fujiwara regents had ruled. Based on the bureaucratic offices of the *ritsuryō* system, it represented a shift of access to power from matrilineal to patrilineal relatives of the emperor. Decisions continued to be made by a relatively small group of high-ranking nobles, the majority of whom were now clients of the retired emperor rather than the Fujiwara regent. The reigning emperor was largely treated as a figurehead; now, however, control over this position returned to the hands of imperial family, allowing it to compete more effectively for the rewards of power.

The cloistered emperor system continued for a long period, although the emperors Shirakawa, Toba, and Go-Shirakawa were the only ones to wield absolute behind-the-scenes power. *Insei* represented a revival of imperial family fortunes: with a vibrant household organization, the ability to attract clients among the nobility, and the opportunity to attract *shōen* holdings of its own, the fortunes of the house increased immeasurably. By the end of the Heian period, in fact, the imperial family had eclipsed the Fujiwara as the largest *shōen* holder in the land.

One common feature of each reign was that the retired sovereign became a Buddhist priest and governed in a way that theoretically respected the teachings of Buddhism. In practice, however, retired emperors seemed more concerned with the construction of ostentatious temples; temples also were endowed with *shōen* commended by clients of the imperial family, some of them coming to possess large numbers of estates for the support of a grand lifestyle. The secularization of Buddhism continued apace. Late Heian times were the “latter days” (*mappō*) of Buddhist calculation, in which one could rely upon nothing but faith in some Buddhist deity or doctrine for salvation. In hopes of salvation, many aristocrats donated funds to construct temples or took holy vows and went to live in temples, which thus became centres of political intrigue. Most higher positions in the religious world were occupied by members of the imperial family and former aristocrats. This effectively closed advancement to commoners, and the lower-ranking monks in the temples often resented their superiors on this account. Whenever some particularly serious grievance arose, they would march in a body on the capital and try to force acceptance of their demands by a direct appeal to the court, a common phenomenon in the last century of the Heian period. Some idea of the nuisance they constituted can be gleaned from the fact that even the most powerful of the retired emperors, Shirakawa, ranked them with the waters of the Kamo River and the dice in games of chance as one of three forces that he was powerless to control. Nor did the monks hesitate to resort to armed force; it was an age in which some members of a priesthood ostensibly committed to compassion and respect for life in all its forms could openly bear arms and engage in slaughter.

The rise of the warrior class

In the late Heian period, the more powerful of the samurai, who, as noted above in Aristocratic government at its peak, first established their power in the provinces, gradually gathered in or near the capital, where they served both the military needs of the state against potential outbreaks of rebellion and as bodyguards for the great noble houses. Through association with the aristocracy, they gradually established a foothold at court. Outstanding among these samurai were the branch of the Minamoto (or Genji) family descended from the emperor Seiwa and the Taira (Heike) family lineage that traced its roots to the emperor Kammu. The Seiwa Genji established themselves as clients in the service of successive Fujiwara regents even before Michinaga was regent. Their fame as a warrior clan was greatly heightened in the mid-11th century when they quelled a rebellion in northeastern Japan. The victorious Minamoto leader Yoshiie became the nation’s most celebrated warrior, and many local figures made voluntary vows of allegiance to him and commended lands to him in return for his protection. Yoshiie’s sudden rise to power forced the court to view him warily, even denying the commendation of estates from would-be clients. The Taira took advantage of this relative decline to advance their own fortunes again.

The Taira had at first settled in the Kantō district, where they extended their influence over a wide area, but they had suffered a setback with the defeat of Taira Masakado and had finally lost their hold in the Kantō district as the result of another later uprising by Masakado's descendant Tadatsune. With the revitalization of the imperial family, the Taira curried favour with the retired emperors. Taira Masamori and his son Tadamori served as governors in several western provinces, building up their own power in the area, and aided the retired emperors' programs of temple building by erecting and endowing a number of new temples. Tadamori also initiated trade with Song dynasty China as a means of amassing wealth. Because the Taira were clients of the retired emperor, their social position rose steadily, and Tadamori's son Kiyomori broke into the ranks of the nobility.

Discord within both the imperial family and the Fujiwara regent's house split the nobility into two factions, each of which enlisted warriors from the Minamoto and the Taira. The two factions eventually clashed openly in Kyōto in what is known as the Hōgen Disturbance (1156). The conflict was on a small scale—the outcome determined by a single night's fighting—yet it was highly significant in that it demonstrated the inability of the courtiers to settle major differences without reliance on the power of the warriors. Conflicts over rewards arose between the two successful Hōgen generals, Minamoto Yoshitomo and Taira Kiyomori, and, in the Heiji Disturbance (1159) that followed, the two warrior clans were pitted against one another. The Minamoto were thoroughly defeated, and Taira Kiyomori emerged as a major power in the land.

Although Kiyomori was born into a middle-ranking provincial warrior family, he became in effect a military noble and dominated the political scene in ways reminiscent of the Fujiwara. Over the two decades following the Heiji Disturbance, Kiyomori and his kinsmen gradually assumed power at court, at first under the sponsorship of the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa but ultimately by seizing power from his patron in 1179. Kiyomori himself became prime minister (*dajō-daijin*), and many other official posts were filled by members of his family. All his daughters were married into powerful noble families, and one even became the consort of the emperor Takakura. The infant prince born of their union ascended to the throne in 1180 as the emperor Antoku, and Kiyomori's power rose even higher through his influence over the throne, which represented a return to government by matrilineal relatives of the emperor. (Not being a Fujiwara, however, Kiyomori never became regent.) Kiyomori's rule also had its more drastic aspects. In a single move, for example, he swept 42 court officials from their posts and into exile, and he razed to the ground such troublesome places as the Tōdai and Kōfuku temples. His repairing of the Inland Sea route, however, and his encouragement of trade with Song China—by which the Taira became wealthy—were farsseeing measures that distinguished Kiyomori from earlier Fujiwara regents.

The high-handed manner in which Kiyomori and his kinsmen dominated the court, however, naturally provoked reaction. While the Taira thrived in the capital, the descendants of the Minamoto quietly built up their strength in the provinces. Finally, Yoritomo, the oldest surviving son of Yoshitomo, who grew up in exile at Izu, invoked the authority of a passed-over imperial prince to rally the Minamoto and other great warrior families in eastern Japan in insurrection. From the initial uprising in 1180 to the final sea battle at Dannoura at the southernmost tip of Honshu, the so-called Gempei (Genji and Heike) War engulfed Japan in warfare on a scale theretofore unseen. Yoritomo himself spent most of the five years recruiting warrior vassals, organizing institutions of control and reward, and planning strategy. He relied on his younger brothers Yoshitsune and Noriyori and his cousin Yoshinaka to attack Kyōto and carry the fight against the Taira-led court forces. Although traditionally portrayed as a simple Taira-versus-Minamoto conflict, the Gempei War was in actuality a combination of interclan and intraclan fighting, as well as a struggle between central control and forces for local autonomy combined under the larger banner of clan rivalry. The final rout of the fleeing Taira forces on the sea, however, put a more or less decisive end to the swing of fortune between Minamoto and Taira.

It also marked an important turning point in Japanese history, since Yoritomo's establishment of a military government (*bakufu*, or *shogunate*, as it is often called in English) in Kamakura may be seen as the commencement of rule by a samurai class and at least the beginning of the end of the ancient monarchical system of court and aristocracy. In one form or another, a *bakufu* (literally, "tent government," the name for the field headquarters of a campaigning warrior) was to hold effective political control in Japan until the restoration of imperial power in 1868.