CHAPTER 3

Capital of Peace and Tranquillity

THE HEIAN PERIOD AND THE COMING OF AGE OF A NATIVE AESTHETIC

Lasting from the mid-sixth through the eighth century, the Asuka, Hakuhō, and Nara periods had been centuries of strong Chinese and Korean influence on Japanese religious and secular institutions. Buddhism grew to dominate Japanese culture during these two and a half centuries, exerting great power in the spiritual and political affairs of the nation. The process of absorbing all of this foreign influence also sparked within the Japanese consciousness a desire to consolidate and develop it into their own distinctive artistic and cultural forms, a transformation that would be completed to stunning effect in the Heian period. The Heian period (794–1185) takes its name from the new capital established in 794 at Heian, or Capital of Peace and Tranquillity, a variation on the Tang Chinese capital's name of Chang'an (Everlasting Peace). The city's present name, Kyoto, simply means "capital" and was an alternate name applied to an imperial city as early as the Nara period. Heian was primarily known as such for the three hundred years after its foundation, but from the end of the eleventh century it would come increasingly to be known simply as Kyoto.

Overbearing Monks and Vengeful Ghosts

The reason for moving the seat of government from Heijō has been traditionally ascribed to the decision of Emperor Kanmu (r. 781–806) and the court to distance the seat of secular power from the centers of the six Buddhist schools, taking warning from the career of the ambitious monk Dōkyō and his pretensions to the throne in the reign of Empress Koken (749–59, 765–70). A new capital was begun in 784 at Nagaoka, southwest of present-day Kyoto and now a suburb of the city. However, after only ten years of occupation the site was abandoned. The reason was a series of fires and other calamities, the cause of which was held to be the ghosts of two political enemies whose mutual nemesis had been involvement in Nagaoka's founding. The first ghost was that of Fujiwara no Tangetsu, who had chosen and purchased for the emperor the site of Nagaoka. The second was his arch enemy, Sawara, a prince of the imperial house. Both men met untimely and violent deaths due to their feud, and their baleful influence was felt by the emperor and court to have permanently tainted the Nagaoka site.

The place chosen for the new capital of Heian was a gently sloping plain just to the north, and almost 25 miles (40 km) northwest of Heijō (which had been renamed Nara) and the great Buddhist temples which remained there. Heian's location satisfied all the requirements of Chinese geomancy: as with Fujiwara and Heijō, it was flanked on three sides by mountains and in addition was bordered by two relatively large rivers, the Kamo to the east and the Katsura to the southwest. Over time, the mountains came to be called the Eastern, Northern, and Western Hills (Higashiyama, Kitayama, and Nishiyama). Kyoto remained the capital of Japan for more than a thousand years, until the emperor moved the court to Tokyo in 1868.

The Heian period embraces four centuries that have been divided into three distinct phases: Early Heian (794–951), Middle Heian or Fujiwara (951–1086), and Late Heian or Insei (1086–1185). The shift in power from the Buddhist community back into the hands of the powerful aristocratic families is fully realized early in this period, and by connection the court culture that had begun to develop with the influx of all the Tang Chinese cultural influences achieves—in the reckoning of many—its greatest refinement. Buddhism, allowed only a limited presence within the capital itself, reorients itself into esoteric cults focused on complex philosophies and rituals as

well as into more populist "saviour" movements that helped for the first time spread the religion widely amongst the common people.

Early Heian Period

The Heian period begins with a continued adherence to Chinese secular and religious precedents, but by the end of its first century there is an overwhelming sense on the part of the Japanese that they have nothing more to gain from contact with China, and that their country has, in fact, surpassed its model. In 894, imperially sponsored embassies to Tang China were abolished, and a little more than ten years later that dynasty fell and the Chinese mainland once again descended into political chaos. While keeping up trade contacts with the continent, the court and aristocracy looked increasingly to themselves as the center of all things, until to leave the capital's environs for more than a very limited time could be interpreted by "society" as practically ceasing to exist. The Japanese people began to examine afresh their artistic environment—their architecture, painting, and sculpture—and to rework old styles and techniques to suit a newly emerging national taste. At the same time, the provinces which in the seventh century had been taken back under direct imperial control had largely, by the beginning of the Heian period, been gifted out to various aristocratic clans—most prominently the Fujiwara—in the form of ***shōen***, or estates.

Middle Heian or Fujiwara Period

The Fujiwara, who from the mid-seventh century onward had taken an active and dominant role in the new Chinese-style imperial government, came to dominate it almost entirely from the late ninth century until the end of the eleventh century, and continued to be a powerful political force until the middle of the twelfth century. And it is for this reason that the Middle Heian period (951–1086)—the height of their influence—is often referred to as the Fujiwara period. In 858, the Fujiwara established a new form of government in direct opposition to that of the Taika Reforms of 645; appointing themselves regents (***sesshō***) and civil dictators (***kanpaku***), they ruled in the name of the emperor. By this time, the Fujiwara clan had intermarried with the Yamato so extensively that the head of the Fujiwara clan, acting as *sesshō* or *kanpaku*, would usually be either the grandfather or uncle and probably also father-in-law of the emperor. With the institution of the *sesshō* and *kanpaku* system, once a Fujiwara consort of an emperor produced an heir apparent, the emperor was encouraged to abdicate and his Fujiwara father-in-law was named initially *sesshō* for the new emperor, and then *kanpaku* when the young ruler came of age. Apart from giving them a stranglehold on government, this structure also enabled the Fujiwara clan leaders to circumvent the mandate for government taxation by the emperor as it was set out in the Taika Reforms.

In order to avoid paying onerous taxes to the central government, other powerful clan leaders and Buddhist temples also pressed the emperor to have their *shōen* lands made tax exempt. The *shōen* of other aristocratic families or temples could then become a kind of vassal-estate of one of these tax-exempted *shōen* in exchange for similar protection from government intrusion. Many of the *shōen* owners themselves were increasingly loathe to leave the capital to oversee even occasionally this important basis for their wealth, and the affairs of the *shōen* were left more and more to local estate managers, who could be lesser members of the clan or simply a local, but capable strongman or even shopkeeper. Under these managers were the peasant farmers, who worked their land more or less as bonded serfs. A single *shōen* often consisted of separate holdings scattered over a large area—a legacy of each clan's original imperial "gifts," as well as the result of centuries of intermarriage and inheritance. By careful manipulation of this *shōen* system, the Fujiwara maintained control not only of the government, but also of the best source of revenue at the time.

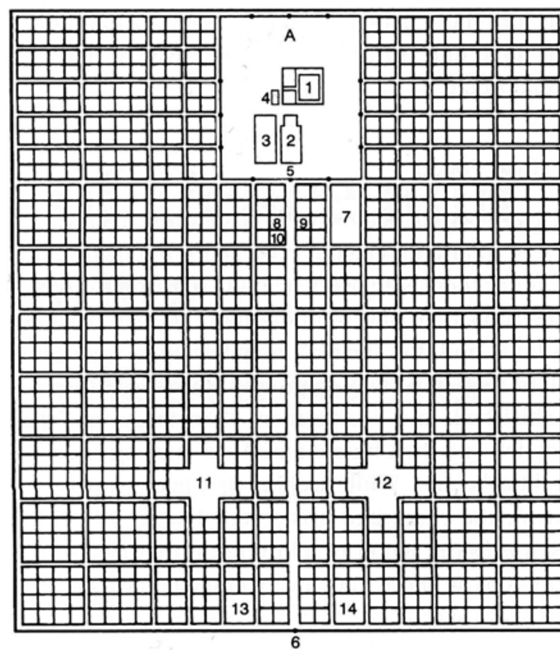
In the Fujiwara period, Japanese culture flourished as never before. From the advent of their control over the government in 858 until the civil wars of the mid-twelfth century, peace prevailed in Heian, and the aristocracy had the leisure and the financial means to undertake aesthetic pursuits such as writing poetry, playing the *biwa* (lute) and the *koto* (zither), and blending incense, and religious activities such as copying Buddhist sutras and making preparations for elaborate Buddhist ceremonies. Poetry became an essential means of polite communication between noblemen and noblewomen, and prose, most notably the ***Genji monogatari*** (***Tale of Genji***) achieved a very high level of literary expression. The Fujiwara period also witnessed the construction of lavish temples, modeled to a large extent after mansions built for the aristocracy. These times have been described by the historian Sir George Sansom as "The Rule of Taste."

Late Heian or Insei Period

From the mid-eleventh century, the imperial clan actively sought to wrest control of the government from the Fujiwara and to rebuild its own financial strength by developing ways to generate income outside the system of taxation established by the Taika Reforms of 645, a system more honored in the breach than in the observance. Emperor Go Sanjō (r. 1068–72) was the first emperor in many decades to be born of a non-Fujiwara mother. Being therefore relatively immune to the dictates of the Fujiwara clan, he was able to formulate the concept that led to the establishment of the ***insei***, or government by cloistered, retired emperors. His idea was to abdicate the throne, withdraw to a Buddhist temple of his own founding, and become a monk. However, he also expected to continue to govern the country through his son, the reigning emperor. Since he no longer held an official position within the hierarchy, he could receive donations of land to the *shōen* he

controlled, and thus also the income they generated, through the intermediary of the temples he and his family had founded. At the same time, members of the aristocracy who wanted to amass merit in both this life and the next could make donations to an imperially sponsored temple, with benefits accruing to all. Thus begins the Late Heian, or Insei, period (1086–1185).

Because Emperor Go Sanjō died shortly after abdicating the throne in 1072, he was unable to put his concept of government by cloistered ex-emperors into practice. However, his son Shirakawa (1053–1129) followed his lead with great success. Ascending to the throne in 1072, Shirakawa ruled as emperor until 1086, when he retired. For the following forty-three years he very effectively directed the government from his cloistered retirement. Shirakawa was without doubt the most effective leader among the three retired emperors of the Late Heian period. His son Toba (1103–56; r. 1107–23), who succeeded to the position of *insei* in 1129 continued the *insei* government for twenty-seven years, but by the time of his death in 1156, the imperial clan was badly split by a succession dispute. Nevertheless, the courts of Shirakawa and Toba outrivaled in opulence those of the most powerful members of the Fujiwara clan.



A Daidairi (greater Imperial Palace)
1 Dairi (Imperial Residence)
2 Chōdōin
3 Barakuin
4 Shingonin
5 Suzakumon
6 Rashōmon)
7 Shinsenen
8 Ukyō-tsukasa (office of the right side of the capital)
9 Sakyō-tsukasa (office of the left side of the capital)
10 Nishi Shanjōdono
11 Western Market
12 Eastern Market
13 Saiji (Western Temple)
14 Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji, Eastern Temple)

125 Plan of Heiankyō (Kyoto as originally laid out).

Rebellion

After Toba's death in 1156, a series of succession disputes within the imperial Yamato and the Fujiwara clans resulted in two rebellions, the **Hōgen** (1156) and the **Heiji** (or Heike; 1160), in which the opposing factions sought the aid of two military clans, the Taira and the Minamoto. Both clans were descended from minor imperial princes of the ninth century, and they had gained considerable power as managers of *shōen* in the provinces, which they had been given to oversee by the imperial house. For three hundred years the aristocracy in the capital had ignored the provinces, leaving such managers to oversee their affairs there. As a consequence, these managers slowly garnered not only wealth but considerable military power, and were called on by the court and capital to put down any peasant rebellions or resolve any political disputes. The disputes among the imperial Yamato, the Fujiwara, and the Taira and Minamoto were finally resolved through the Genpei Civil War, which lasted from 1180 to 1185 and which was bitterly fought throughout the country, not excluding the capital or the ancient Buddhist center of Nara. Its close, in 1185, marks the end of the Heian period and the control of the government through the emperor and the court. The Taira clan was almost completely wiped out in an epic sea battle which ended with the women of the Taira household leaping to watery graves clutching the infant Emperor Antoku.

The victorious Minamoto established a new form of military dictatorship, the ***bakufu***, which under one military clan or another would oversee the governing of the nation until 1868 and the imperial restoration. They also removed the center of actual government to the eastern coast of Honshū at Kamakura. Although largely powerless, the system of *insei* did continue until the faction of the last cloistered emperor, Go Toba (1179–1239; r. 1184–98), was defeated in the **Jōkyū Rebellion** of 1221. Until the restoration of 1868, the emperor and his court faded at times into an almost provincial irrelevance—a bitterly ironic twist of fate.

The Arts in the Late Heian Period

Although the Late Heian period concluded with the demise of the glitter and elegance of court life, it had begun with an opulence far greater than that seen under the rule of even the most powerful Fujiwara clan leaders. The chief focus of the imperial family was, not surprisingly, on the founding of Yamato clan temples. It has been calculated that between the late eleventh and the middle of the twelfth century the retired emperor, his kin, and his loyal subjects dedicated a new Shinto worship hall every year and founded a Buddhist temple every five years. During this period a great deal of time and money were devoted to secular projects as well. A lavish set of perhaps one hundred paintings illustrating excerpts from the *Genji monogatari* has survived to the present, and quite probably many more were produced (see Figs 140 and 141). Poems of the so-called thirty-six immortal poets, the Sanjūrokunin, were copied onto scrolls made of gorgeous colored papers decorated with gold and silver designs (see Fig. 136).

The Taira family made a richly ornamented set of thirty-three scrolls of the *Lotus Sutra* (JAP. *Myōhōrenge kyō*) and four other Buddhist texts, copying the Chinese characters with gold and silver ink onto decorated paper, and in addition frequently designing and painting elaborate frontispieces. Where, in the Middle Heian, the ladies of the court devoted themselves to writing romances, during the Insei period they apparently devoted considerable time to painting. Some of the frontispieces of the Taira's *Lotus Sutra*, known as the *Heike nōkyō* (*Sutra Offering of the Taira Family*), were painted by Taira ladies (see Fig. 194), and in a journal entry for 1130 mention is made of a *nyōbo no edokoro*, a painting bureau staffed by women, within the imperial palace. Some aristocrats in the Late Heian period, unlike their predecessors in the previous centuries, took great interest in folktales, in a few cases secular, but most often centered on miraculous events related to temples; and they went so far as to compile them in anthologies. The most famous of these is the *Konjaku monogatari*, an alternate reading of the first two words of each story, "*Imawa mukashi*" (A long time ago). The Late Heian period may have seen the final flowering of Heian court culture, but it was a very rich flowering indeed. Fortunately for later generations, quite a few remnants of that extraordinary Japanese century have survived to the present day.

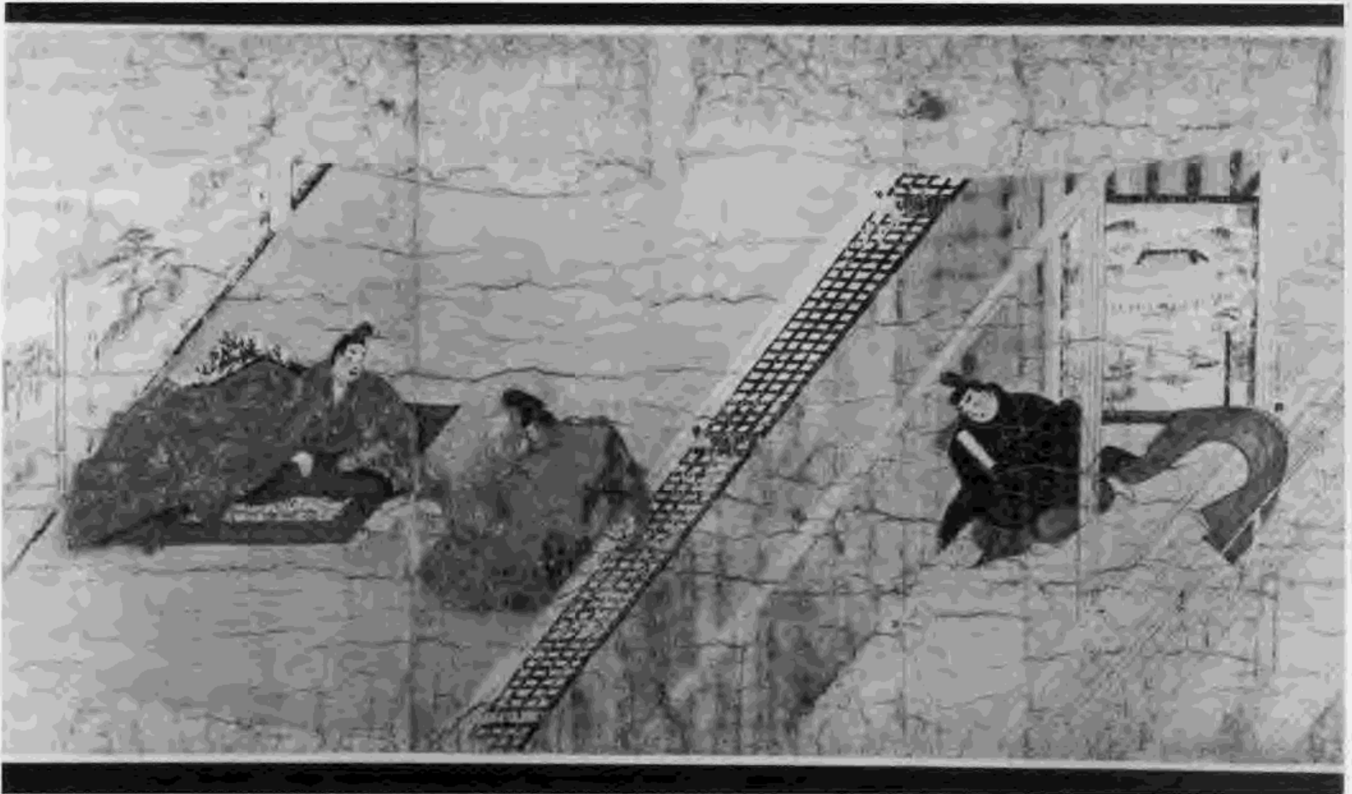
Heian and the Imperial Palace

As with Fujiwara, Heijō, and Nagaoka before it, Heian was laid out in a rectangular grid—here measuring about 3 miles (5 km) from east to west and 4 miles (6 km) from north to south (Fig. 125). Its streets were plotted in a hatchwork of wide avenues running from north to south and smaller streets crossing from east to west. The palace precinct, which included the government buildings, occupied the four central blocks at the extreme north of the city, while the commercial districts were relegated to an area just to the north of the two major Buddhist temples that were allowed within the boundaries of the city, Tōji and Saiji in the city's original plans. These were positioned near the southern boundary of the city and ostensibly served as spiritual guardians of Heian's primary entrance, but were also positioned as far away from the emperor and the bureaux of government as possible. The Kyoto of today looks very different from its Heian ancestor. The modern city has shifted to the east and centers on the Kamo River, with its shallow, swiftly running water and cool summer breezes.

The imperial palace complex that exists today has moved to a more central position within the city, located to the east of the original site, and none of the original buildings in the palace enclosure still stand. However, research has established the original layout of the ninth-century imperial residence. The most imposing building within the walled enclosure remained the Chinese-style Daigokuden (Great Audience Hall). Even more enormous than its Fujiwara or Heijō predecessors, it became largely obsolete within several decades of its construction as the official receptions it used to host instead occurred in more intimate and comfortable buildings within the emperor's residential sector of the palace. The Daigokuden stood derelict for much of the period until it burnt down in 1177. It was never rebuilt, but a tribute to it can be found in a scaled-down version at the Heian Shrine of 1895. The two buildings which took on a great many of the functions of the Daigokuden were the Shishinden, used for major ceremonies of state, and, to its northwest and connected by roofed corridors, the Seiryōden, where the emperor lived and held informal audiences. Other buildings, housing the emperor's consorts and ladies-in-waiting as well as such essential structures as the kitchen, a doctor's office, and storerooms for the imperial regalia, extended to the north and east of the two main buildings and were linked to them by covered walkways. The government buildings, as in previous palaces, were located to the south of the Daigokuden near the main entrance gate.

The current Shishinden and Seiryōden date to the nineteenth century and not the early ninth century, but at the time

126 View of the Shishinden (Throne Hall), Imperial Palace, Kyoto. Rebuilt in 1855 in the early Heian *shinden* (palace) style.



127 Illustration from *Ban Dainagon ekotoba*, scroll 1, scene 2, showing the interior of the Seiryōden, Imperial Palace, Kyoto, attributed to Tokiwa Mitsunaga. 2nd half of the 12th century. Hand scroll, ink and color on paper; height 12 ⅜ in. (31.5 cm). Idemitsu Art Museum, Tokyo.

of rebuilding every effort was made to reproduce the originals (Fig. 126). The contrast between the two structures offers considerable insight into the way in which Tang culture was assimilated in Japan in the ninth century. The Shishinden, being intended for ceremonial use, is an imposing building supported on tall pillars and capped with a massive double roof of cypress bark. The interior has a wood-plank floor and large wooden platforms; panels depicting Confucian sages stand behind the platforms, forming a wall. The Seiryōden, on the other hand, is much more intimate in scale. It is set on low pillars and has a single cypress-bark roof. Their common roofing material of cypress bark, however, signals another important change. Where great public buildings like the Daigokuden were roofed with tiles, there now is a volte-face in courtly taste for the previously humble and native cypress bark.

Inside these buildings, life continued to be lived on the floor with tatami mats used for sitting and sleeping surfaces. Some idea of the original appearance of the room can be obtained from an illustration in a twelfth-century narrative scroll, the *Ban Dainagon ekotoba* (Fig. 127). In this scene, the emperor, conducting an informal audience with the retired prime minister of the Fujiwara clan, sits on a pillow placed on a low, tatami-covered platform. His back is to a wall formed by sliding doors (***fusuma***) decorated with Japanese-style (*yamato-e*) landscapes. Outside, on the veranda, a messenger awaits their decision. Behind him is a standing screen decorated with a Chinese-style, or ***kara-e***, painting of Lake Kunming, the lake to the south of the Tang emperor's summer retreat. In the last analysis, the Japanese court of the Heian period still looked to China for certain models, but both its public and private rooms become increasingly indigenous in flavor, with occasional Chinese touches to demonstrate its sophistication and education, such as the Lake Kunming screen.

Life at Court

During this period, the aristocracy living in Heian numbered perhaps no more than one thousand people, but the choices they made about where and how they lived, what they did with their abundant leisure time, and even how they worshiped set the tone for artistic creation in the Heian period and permeated almost every aspect of life in the capital. The ideal of beauty for a woman was to have a round face with tiny features framed by long, flat black hair, her face powdered white, her eyebrows plucked and re-pencilled in, and her teeth blackened. She would dress in the voluminous (and certainly heavy), many-layered silk robes of the period (see Fig. 137). The ideal man would also have a round face and tiny features, and would dress in carefully chosen silk robes of several layers, but of a different cut (see Figs 127, 133, 134, and 135). Both the Heian gentleman and gentlewoman were expected to be the products of, and contribute to, a highly refined courtly