

Sidebar

History · List of Japanese Periods Cheat Sheet

Every major period of Japanese history, prehistoric to present, with one genuinely interesting fact each. Dates before the Asuka period are approximate — the further back, the less precisely they can be pinned down.

ANCIENT JAPAN

Jōmon c. 14,000–300 BCE — named for its cord-marked pottery, among the oldest pottery traditions found anywhere in the world

Yayoi c. 300 BCE–300 CE — wet rice farming and metalworking arrive from the continent; named after the Tokyo neighborhood where its pottery was first identified

Kofun c. 300–538 — named for the huge keyhole-shaped burial mounds built for rulers; Emperor Nintoku's tomb covers more ground than the Great Pyramid of Giza

Asuka 538–710 — Buddhism formally introduced; Prince Shōtoku's Seventeen-Article Constitution, Japan's first

Nara 710–794 — Japan's first fixed, permanent capital, modeled directly on the Tang dynasty capital in China

Heian 794–1185 — the golden age of court culture; Murasaki Shikibu wrote *The Tale of Genji*, often called the world's first novel

FEUDAL / SHOGUNATE JAPAN

Kamakura 1185–1333 — Minamoto no Yoritomo becomes the first shogun; real power shifts from the imperial court to the warrior class; the Mongol invasions of 1274/1281 were repelled partly by typhoons later mythologized as "kamikaze," divine wind

Kenmu Restoration 1333–1336 — a brief, failed attempt to restore direct imperial rule between two shogunates

Muromachi 1336–1573 — the Ashikaga shogunate; tea ceremony, Noh theatre, and Zen-influenced arts flourish even as the later Sengoku ("Warring States") era descends into a century of civil war

Azuchi-Momoyama 1573–1603 — Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi's drive to reunify the country after Sengoku; named after their respective castles

Edo 1603–1868 — Tokugawa Ieyasu founds the shogunate; the *sakoku* ("closed country") policy shuts Japan off from most outside contact for over 200 years of internal peace and flourishing urban culture

MODERN JAPAN

Meiji 1868–1912 — Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" (1853) forced Japan open; the Meiji Restoration ends the shogunate and restarts direct imperial rule, kicking off breathtakingly fast modernization

Taishō 1912–1926 — a brief era marked by a genuine (if short-lived) "Taishō Democracy" movement

Shōwa 1926–1989 — the longest era in Japanese history, under Emperor Hirohito; spans the Second World War and the postwar economic miracle that followed it

Heisei 1989–2019 — Emperor Akihito's reign; includes the 1995 Kobe earthquake and the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami

Reiwa 2019–present — Emperor Naruhito; the current era name, meaning roughly "beautiful harmony," was the first drawn from a classical Japanese text (the *Man'yōshū*) rather than a Chinese one

NOTES & TRIVIA

Longest era Shōwa — 63 years, 1926–1989

Shortest era Kenmu Restoration — about 3 years

Longest peace Edo period — over 250 years with almost no external war

How eras are named Modern era names (*gengō*) change with each emperor's reign; before Meiji, an era could also change mid-reign for other reasons

TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF "PERIOD" ARE MIXED TOGETHER HERE

Periods up through Edo are named for a place — usually the seat of power at the time (Nara the city, the Heian and Kamakura and Muromachi and Edo districts, or the Azuchi/Momoyama castles). From Meiji onward, periods are instead named for the era name (*gengō*) tied to each emperor's reign — a genuinely different naming logic, not just a coincidence of style. Both are simply called "periods" in English, which can make the list read as more uniform than the naming convention behind it actually is.