

1. A New Capital

During the 8th century, the Buddhist priests of Nara gained a great deal of influence over the Japanese court. In 784, Emperor Kammu decided to move his capital away from Nara, in part because he thought the priests' power was damaging to the government. The emperor also wanted a larger, grander city for his capital.

The first site Kammu chose was Nagaoka, about 30 miles from Nara, but the move was troubled from the beginning. As money poured in to build the new city, rumors of corruption, or dishonesty, spread. People said the land had been acquired through a deal with a rich Chinese family. The site also seemed to be unlucky, because the emperor's family suffered illnesses at this time. In 794, the emperor stopped work on the city and, once again, ordered that the capital be moved.

This time, Kammu chose a village on the Yodo River, a site that was both lovelier than Nagaoka and easier to defend. There, Kammu began building a new city he called Heian-kyo. *Kyo* means “city” in Japanese. *Heian-kyo* means, “The Capital of Peace and Tranquility.” This event marks the beginning of the **Heian period**.

Heian-kyo, which is now the city of Kyoto, became the first truly Japanese city. As with Nara, Heian-kyo was laid out in a checkerboard pattern like the Chinese city of Chang'an. Built on a grand scale, the walled city was lovely and elegant, with wide, tree-lined streets. It was set in forested hills, amid streams, waterfalls, and lakes. Shrines and temples blended with the area's natural beauty.

Heian-kyo's crisscrossing streets were modeled after those of Chang'an, but the city's architecture was Japanese. In the center of the city were palaces and government offices. Wealthy Heian families lived in mansions surrounded by beautiful gardens with artificial lakes. The grounds of each home covered three to four acres and were enclosed by white stone walls.

Inside the mansions, large rooms were divided by screens or curtains and connected with open-air covered hallways. Simplicity was considered beautiful, so there were few objects on the wood floors other than straw mats and cushions. The Japanese did not use chairs.

Daily life was very formal, and correct manners were extremely important. For example, a Heian lady sat behind a portable screen that hid her from view while she talked and took part in life around the house. An unmarried lady would permit her suitor to see past the screen only after a romance had become serious.

9. The Effect of the Heian Period on Japan Today

As you have learned, the Heian period witnessed the birth of a unique Japanese culture, and the effects of this cultural flowering are still felt today. In fact, much of Japan's culture has remained quite constant since the Heian period, which can be seen most clearly in Japan's literature and drama.

Heian authors influenced many later Japanese writers. The *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu and *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon are classics that are as basic to Japanese culture as Shakespeare's works are to the English-speaking world.

The success of these writers had a major effect on Japan's written language. Today, Japanese people write with the same characters used in the *Tale of Genji*.

Heian influence is also seen in modern poetry. The short poems called tanka were very popular in Heian times, and this type of poetry remains a vibrant part of Japanese literature.

Modern Japanese drama also shows Heian influences. As you may recall, the bugaku performances of Heian times blended dance and drama. Bugaku led to Japan's unique Noh theater. In Noh dramas, a chorus sings a heroic story as performers dance and act it out. Noh theater is centuries old, but it is still a popular form of entertainment in Japan.