Japan in the Heian Period and Cultural History: Crash Course World History 227

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to return to medieval times.

Mr. Green? Mr. Green? Finally, we get to watch jousting and eat with our hands and root for the Blue Knight.

Yeah, No, Me from the Past, for starters, medieval times doesn't closely reflect Europe in medieval times. And furthermore, we're not going to be talking about Europe in medieval times, although we will be talking about kings and courts and aristocratic intrigue, but we're gonna be talking about all those things in Japan.

=====Crash Course Theme=====

So discussions of Japanese history often focus on the Tokugawa period because it's got ninja and samurai, but much of the foundation of Japanese culture dates to the Heian period between 782 and 1167 CE.

And when I say Japanese culture, I do mean culture, because the achievements of the Heian period were primarily artistic, especially in literature. So for most of this episode, we'll be looking at cultural history as opposed to like economic or political history.

As a novelist, and also a consumer of culture, I'm a big fan of cultural history. What I love about it is that it embraces the human imagination. I mean, you can't just make up economic theories. Just kidding, you can.

Anyway, for our purposes, Heian culture is the high culture of the upper-upper-class aristocracy, and obviously focusing on this tiny sliver of the upper class leaves out the experience of most Japanese people. But we know a lot more about the elite than we know about everyone else because it was the elite who were doing all of the writing things down and they were writing about the people they found the most interesting - themselves.

In fact one of the reasons we know a great deal about the Heian aristocracy is because of Japan's first great novel: *The Tale of the Genji,* by Lady Murasaki Shikibu. Now the historian James Murdoch called the Heian aristocracy

"An ever-pullulating brood of greedy, needy, frivolous dilletanti - as often as not foully licentious, utterly effeminate, incapable of any worthy achievement".

But when you boil all the unnecessarily fancy words out of that quote, that sounds like people I'm very interested in learning about. In fact, I love some fallicentuousness.

So one of the first things we learn from texts about the Heian aristocracy is that the aristocracy was dominated by a craze for things Chinese. Now Chinese visitors to Japan thought the country was backwards and out of the way and uncivilized.

But one of the reasons the Japanese seemed backwards to Chinese visitors is that the Japanese in the 10th century admired Tang China, which had flourished a couple of hundred years earlier. But there was also the fact that the Japanese blended Chinese ideas, especially Chinese Buddhism, with native traditions.

In fact one of the most interesting aspects of Heian Japan was the overall attitude of the aristocracy, which was characterized by a love of color, and grandeur, and ceremony, and ritual, that was tinged with some Buddhist-inspired ideas. You know, it's sort of like how everyone in Canada wears powdered wigs and knee breeches to look like 18th century England.

And one of the central idea in Buddhism is that everything beautiful, and also everything not beautiful, is fleeting. Like historian Ivan Morris wrote that in the literature of the time, there was a quote "feeling that the familiar order of things will soon come to an end". Which by the way is always an appropriate feeling.

So the center of aristocratic court life was the capital, Heian Jyo, which during the Heian golden age may have had a populations as high as 100,000 people, making it much larger than most European cities at the time. It may have been a glorious capital but we don't really know because most of the city was destroyed by earthquakes, or possibly fires, or possibly wars, or just the desire for new construction. We're not sure.

We also know that the Heian aristocracy was rigidly hierarchical, with society divided into about 30 grades based on one's birth. The top 4 grades were reserved for princes, and the top 3, known as the KugyÅ•, received all the most important privileges, including governmental posts and revenues from special rice land.

These people in the highest ranks could send their children to university, wear ceremonial dress, they were given lighter punishments when they committed crimes. Can you imagine a world in which rich people systemically receive lighter sentences for crimes committed than poor people?

These rules were so detailed that they even determined what type of fan you could hold. The top 3 ranks got to hold 25-fold fans.

But when *The Tale of the Genji* was written, this rank system, like all of those ranks, applied to less than 1/10th of 1% of the total population, so we're really talking about the elites. As Ivan Morris put it:

"Members of the upper class are almost all related to each other. They are totally uninterested in everyone outside their charmed circle and exceedingly sensitive in judging the precise social level of each person who does belong. In Murasaki's milieu, to determine a person's milieu was no simple diversion, but a matter of overriding importance."

Now that description reminds me a lot of my high school experience.

Aristocrats dominated the government, which over time became more and more ceremonial and ritualistic. In fact by the 10th century, much government work was carried out at night and consisted almost entirely of ceremonies. The nice thing about doing boring ceremonial work at night though: there was a lot of wine.

So yeah, that doesn't make for like, excellent government efficiency. Heian Japan's economy was not much better than its governance. There was very little trade and attempted land reform, which was supposed to grant every citizen a parcel of public domain land, totally failed.

Meanwhile, aristocrats accumulated vast agricultural land holdings, and by the 10th century court nobles were largely supported by these tax-free estates called manors. Now interestingly, the nobles didn't technically own the land outright, as they did in much of Europe. Instead they owned the rights to income from the land and then those rights could be transferred to their heirs, so it was

similar to ownership, but it wasn't quite ownership.

Also different from Europe: upper-class Japanese women could hold the rights to a manor, and thus have a rather impressive degree of economic power. And that matters a lot because women played a key role in the flourishing of Heian literary culture that makes this period of history so interesting to study in the first place.

Like over all this inefficient corrupt cronyism of Japan's government and economy definitely weakened this state. But it also provided time and money for the aristocracy to make beautiful and interesting things.

=====Thought Bubble =====

Let's go to the thought bubble. Heian aristocrats were expected to feel melancholy over the transience of existence.

"In Murasaki's time," according to Ivan Morris "periodical protestations of melancholy and gloom were essential for people who regarded themselves as sensitive," and sensitivity especially to art was the hallmark of aristocratic breeding. The aristocratic gentleman is exemplified by prince Genji himself: quote "With his gentle nature, his sensitivity and his wide range of artistic skills, who represented the ideal of the age and who set the tone for the social and cultural life of the good people"

Buddhism was very influential on the aristocrats aesthetic ideal that beauty must be cultivated because it is so impermanent. This quote from the tale of Genji illustrated this focus on impermanence: "'Like the waterfowl that play there on the lake, I too am floating along the surface of a transient world' I could not help comparing them with myself. For they too appeared to be enjoying themselves in the most carefree fashion; yet their lives must be full of sorrow."

Stan, are you sure that's from the tale of Genji? I think I've seen that quote attributed to me on Tumblr. But we don't only know about the emotional state of the aristocracy, we also know about their pastimes. We refer to nobles as the leisure class for a reason after all, they spent a lot of time playing games, and engaging in contests.

Poetry contests were popular, as were board games, like Go, and much of their time was taken up with ceremonies and rituals.

Here is an example from the court calendar: "18th day: Bowman's Wager, the new year's celebrations are concluded by an archery contest which is held in his majesties presence between officers of the inner and middle palace guards. This is followed by a banquet during which court dances are performed and prizes awarded to the winning side. Members of the losing side are forced to drink the cup of defeat."

=====End Thought Bubble=====

Thanks, thought bubble. I'd like to make an announcement here at Crash Course from now on whenever we refer to anyone losing anything we will say that they were forced to drink from the cup of defeat.

So you know other than pure Game of Thrones style drama, this highly ritualized very insular social order of the elites of the elites of the elites isn't usually the kind of stuff we'd study at Crash Course.

But first, thinking about the lives of the Heian aristocracy tells us something about the lives of the rich and powerful generally. Like obviously they had to increasingly separate themselves from each other to feel more and more wealthy and powerful.

Which progressively led to them being more and more separated from, you know, the vast, vast majority of people living in Japan. But also they produced and consumed cultural artifacts that came to define the style of the age but also have continued to shape culture.

Heian aristocracy and the documents that describe it tell us a lot about women, who as we've seen are often left out of historical narratives. The Heian period, at least culturally, was dominated by women, particularly Murasaki Shikibu and Sei ShÅ•nagon.

So in some ways at least, unlike almost everything we've studied, our view of the period is dominated by women's perspectives, although it is the perspective of the most privileged women.

And what we see is consistent with a lot of upper-class mores: these women are obsessed with their looks, and especially with their clothes which were cumbersome and heavy. They were expected to wear their hair very long, preferably reaching to the ground. They had to powder their faces and blacken their teeth and they lived the circumscribed lives typical of upper-class women throughout the world.

Although there were some legal protections that they enjoyed: like we talked about how they could have income from property. Laws also protected them from physical violence, specifically prohibiting a husband from beating his wife, which might not sound like that big of a deal but compared to women's lives in Europe, that was a big improvement.

And upper-class women in Heian Japan were all literate and educated, although their education was limited to the types of cultural skills that would make them attractive to men: poetry, music, calligraphy, maybe some literature. Disciplines like history and law and philosophy were mostly off limits.

And that brings me to something I want to talk about: all of these privileges: from the heavy, cumbersome clothes that make it difficult to move to the kinds of education women could have or the kinds of limited legal protections they could have, all of that is evidence of a patriarchy.

So we see through these women's stories the way that they were able to express themselves and their philosophies and the way that they lived in the world. So women like Murasaki Shikibu lived constrained, cloistered lives, but of course there were opportunities available to them that weren't available to men. And that's what's so exciting about being able to read their narratives. We just don't have many equivalents to that in Europe at the time.

That noted, these women, like their male counterparts, spent most of their lives indoors, and communicated mostly by intermediaries or letters. Women couldn't show themselves to men or make conversation with them. But there was a great deal of interest and intrigue around love and romance, not least because Heian gentlemen were expected to be polygamous and also to engage in extramarital affairs.

But just because sexual relations were often divorced from marriage and love affairs were common doesn't mean that they lacked emotional consequences. In the stories you read about Heian Japan everyone is always worried that they're going to like, fall out of favor with their lover or their husband or their whatever. It's so exciting! To read about, I mean, I'm sure if you're living inside of it it would make you very anxious.

Also when courtship and marriage had political dimensions, as they did in the highest noble ranks, women were often in danger of being displaced by a more advantageous match.

And we know from the stories that all of this combined into pangs of jealousy and fear of being abandoned and then pain when you actually were abandoned. And those kinds of stories, I'm sure I don't have to tell you, have a kind of universality about them.

The last thing I want to say here is that power works differently when you're not in power, right? Like if you're a student in a high school classroom the teacher has the power, but you have some power.

And the most interesting thing about the stories from the Heian aristocracy is the ways that women used the power that they did have to bring about change in their own lives and in their communities.

So by looking at history through the lens of literature we get a very different perspective than if we were to focus on government documents, or archaeology, or descriptions of war. This helps us to try to develop a sense of how people at the time felt, although we're only dealing with a very limited group of people, obviously.

The cultural achievements of the Heian Period, described and exemplified by *The Tale of Genji*, were considerable, especially when compared to what Europeans were accomplishing at the time. And it's another reminder that we need to be careful when we talk about the 9th and 10th centuries as the Dark Ages.

It's also interesting that the Heian Period in Japan wasn't particularly successful politically or economically, but that it did lead to great cultural achievements. And almost all of the literary achievements were made by women, which as Morris points out is "a rare, if not unique, phenomenon in cultural history."

For Heian Japan the historical record was written primarily by women. And while *The Tale of Genji* doesn't discuss politics or economics the way that we usually imagine them, and while it describes a world that leaves out 99% of Japanese people during the period, it has a lot to tell us about the way that at least some people felt and lived, which is more than can be said for a lot of history books.

And that's a type of history that most of us can relate to more than stuff with generals and kings in it. For instance when I look at the history of my own life I find that generals and kings have played a very minor role. Jealously on the other hand: not insignificant.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.