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HISTORY OF JAPAN

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Unboring History of Japan for Kids

Funny, Interesting, Concise Guide to a Time of Samurai,
Ninjas and Shoguns You Won't Believe Are True

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Table of Contents



Introduction	9
Chapter 1: Volcanoes, Islands, and a Very Shaky Start	11
Chapter 2: Gods, Gates, and Zero Atheists	17
Chapter 3: The Emperor Who Lost His Army	23
Chapter 4: Swords, Codes, and Questionable Haircuts	29
Chapter 5: Ninja School Was Terrible	35
Chapter 6: Castles, Lords, and Endless Land Fights	41
Chapter 7: The Shogun Who Ran Everything	47
Chapter 8: Japan Locks the Door and Hides	53
Chapter 9: Poems, Wrestlers, and Very Loud Theater	59
Chapter 10: The Black Ships Nobody Asked For	67
Chapter 11: Japan Goes Modern in About Ten Minutes	75
Chapter 12: Earthquakes, Waves, and Still Standing	81
Chapter 13: Bullet Trains, Manga, and What Comes Next	89
Conclusion	97
Riddle Answer Sheet	101
Glossary	105

Introduction



Here is something your history textbook will never tell you.

The most powerful military rulers in Japan spent 265 years ensuring that one of the wealthiest groups in the country could not legally wear silk. The people wore it anyway, on the inside of their robes, where nobody could see. This is Japanese culture in a nutshell: Rules are followed in the open, but citizens can be very creative finding a way around them.

Japan is a place where customs and laws have a rule or historical context behind them. For instance, Japan's trains always run on time, a legacy of the Samurai's code teaching absolute discipline. Poems composed of exactly seventeen syllables are the product of a culture that created fortresses that bought Japanese fighters enough time to repel invaders. Convenience stores that sell food and

electricity at 2 am exist in a nation where it was once against the law to make a ship that could sail abroad.

This is a country that sits atop four colliding tectonic plates and built a civilization anyway. That got forced open by foreign warships and responded by sending thousands of students abroad to learn shipbuilding. Where ninja tradecraft became a formal discipline with written rules. Japan even invented a philosophical category for inventions that are technically useful but practically impossible.

You will soon encounter warriors whose discipline was such that even death was prescribed and emperors with full titles and no authority whatsoever. Japan has painters who took seventy years to practice their art because they deemed their work mere warm up. Once, there was a colony of Dutch traders confined to an island the size of a small block of buildings, which was Japan's sole portal to the outside world.

None of this is boring. None of it was ever boring. Somebody just forgot to mention that part.

Turn the page. Japan has been waiting.

Chapter 1

Volcanoes, Islands, and a Very Shaky Start



The Unboring Story

Your world has been shaken up. No small tremor, but a full roll as if the planet itself is trying to shake you off its surface. Your coffee mug falls off the table. Your dog is barking like crazy. A neighbor runs out of his house in pajamas, looking to see what's wrong. Far below the surface of the Pacific Ocean, two huge rock plates have slammed into each other yet again.

Welcome to Japan, where the ground never fully makes up its mind!

Japan sits on what scientists call the **Ring**

of Fire, a loop of volcanic activity and earthquakes circling the Pacific Ocean. Four massive tectonic plates grind against each other directly beneath the Japanese islands, which means Japan experiences around 1,500 earthquakes every year. Most are too small to feel. Some are absolutely huge.

The islands themselves were born from this chaos. Millions of years ago, volcanic eruptions kept pushing rock up through the ocean floor until four main islands poked above the surface. Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Together with nearly 7,000 smaller islands, they form a curved chain about 1,500 miles long. That's roughly the same length as the entire East Coast!



About 73 percent of Japan is mountains. Limited flat land left the early Japanese squished onto narrow coastal strips and river valleys. Japan's

people got good at farming rice in flooded paddies and fishing from boats to provide food.

The first humans arrived in Japan at least 30,000 years ago, possibly earlier. The earliest culture we know about is called the **Jomon** people, who lived by hunting and gathering and made some of the oldest pottery ever found anywhere on Earth. Their clay pots date back 16,000 years, which means your school lunch container has some serious catching up to do.

A new set of immigrants arrived in Japan around 300 BC. They introduced new cultivation techniques for rice, metalworking skills, and an entirely new lifestyle. Known as the Yayoi settlers, their arrival marked the end of one era and gave rise to a whole new civilization.

In other words, before the emergence of samurai, shoguns, or high-speed trains, Japan



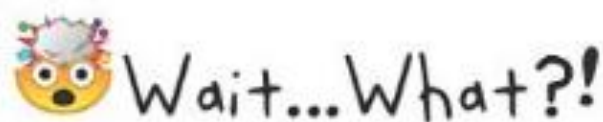
was a chain of fragile volcanic islands. The islands had two groups of rather determined peoples and roughly 1,500 earthquakes each year. Still, they prevailed.

Side Stories

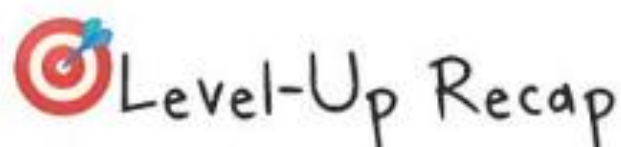
Japan looks like a crescent or curved dragon on a map, but locals have a different way of thinking about it. Many Japanese describe their country as a group of stepping stones between the Asian continent and the open Pacific. That geography made Japan easy to reach by boat from Korea and China. These civilizations provided Japan's early cultural influences, including writing, Buddhism, and the idea of a centralized government.

The Jomon culture not only left behind pottery. There are clay sculptures known as dogu, miniature human figures with huge, goggle-like eyes that seem alien. There is no evidence of their purpose, but some researchers believe they were part of healing rituals, while others believe they depict spirits.

Mount Fuji, Japan's most famous volcano, last erupted in 1707. It dumped so much ash on the city of Edo (modern Tokyo) that people had to shovel it off their roofs like snow. Volcanic rock snow. Nobody was happy about it.



Earthquakes are so common in Japan that the Japanese government mandates earthquake drills similar to our fire drills. Schoolchildren learn to hide under their desks, office workers practice crawling under their work tables, and smartphone apps alert users a few seconds before an earthquake begins. These are possible because Japan's earthquake detection system is so accurate. Here's where things get crazy: those few seconds don't seem like much, but it's enough time slow down a bullet train moving at 200 miles per hour.



Japan is a 1,500-mile chain of islands sitting on top of four colliding tectonic plates, which is basically the geologically worst address possible. These islands were formed by volcanic eruptions, which means Japan owes its entire existence to the very thing that keeps trying to shake it apart. Early civilization is varied: the Jomon people were here first, making pottery older than most civilizations. Later, the Yayoi people brought farming and changed everything. Out of that shaky, volcanic, crowded-coastal start, one of the most fascinating civilizations on Earth grew. Not bad for a place where the ground moves 1,500 times a year!



Unboring Riddles

Riddle 1: I shake and rumble, I bubble and blow, I'm a ring of fire where hot volcanoes glow. I circle the Pacific from Japan to Peru. What am I called? Here's a hint: I'm fiery too!

Riddle 2: I'm older than writing, older than wheels, made of baked clay to carry your meals. Japan's earliest people shaped me by hand. I'm one of the oldest objects in the land. What am I?

Riddle 3: I'm a mountain, I'm a volcano, I haven't blown in a while. My snowy white peak is Japan's most famous profile. I dumped ash on Tokyo way back in the day. Millions come to visit me. What's my name? Can you say?

Chapter 3

The Emperor Who Lost His Army



The Unboring Story

The emperor is sitting in his palace in Kyoto, wearing twelve layers of robes and a hat that looks like a narrow black boat balanced on his head. He has servants, poets, and a garden full of carefully raked gravel. What he lacks is any real power.

Out in the countryside, men on horseback with swords are running the place now. And nobody asked the emperor how he felt about that!

For most of Japan's early history, the emperor was the supreme ruler, believed to be descended directly from the sun goddess Amaterasu. That made him sacred. It also made

everyone very careful about bothering him with messy things like wars and land disputes. Over time, noble families began handling governance while the emperor stayed in his palace, writing poetry and performing religious ceremonies. The emperor kept the title. Everyone else made the decisions.

By the 800s CE, one noble family had risen above all the others. The Fujiwara clan controlled access to the emperor so completely that they basically ran Japan for about 300 years. Yet, they never claimed the throne themselves. They did it by marrying their daughters into the imperial family, so every new emperor was the Fujiwara clan's grandson. Sneaky, effective, and completely undeniable.



But out in the provinces, something new was growing. Local landowners needed protection that the imperial government couldn't provide. So they hired warriors, men trained from childhood

to fight on horseback. In battle, they carried bows and a new type of curved steel sword that could slice through armor as if it weren't there. These warriors were called **samurai**, and once they got powerful enough, they stopped working for the nobles and started working for themselves.

In 1185, a samurai clan leader named Minamoto no Yoritomo defeated his rivals in a brutal civil war and marched on the capital. The emperor couldn't stop him. The Fujiwara clan couldn't stop him. Nobody could stop him, because he had about 100,000 soldiers, and they had poetry. Yoritomo set up his own military government in a city called Kamakura, far from the emperor's capital. He called himself **Shogun**, which means "commander of the military."

The emperor kept his throne. He kept his robes. He kept his carefully raked gravel garden. But



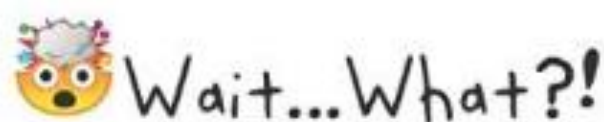
for the next 700 years, real power in Japan belonged to whoever held the title of Shogun.

Side Stories

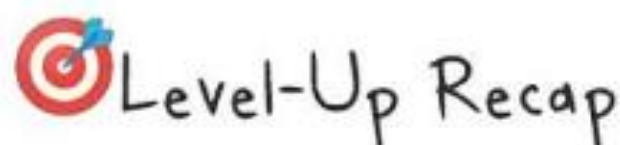
The Fujiwara family's grip on power produced one unintended side effect: a golden age of Japanese art and literature. With everyone at court trying to impress the Fujiwara and the emperor, poets competed with each other, painters refined their craft, and writers produced some of history's greatest early literature. "The Tale of Genji," written around 1000 CE by a noblewoman named Murasaki Shikibu, is widely considered the world's first novel. It runs about 1,000 pages and covers three generations of Japanese court life. People still read and study this novel today. It was written by a woman at a time when most of the world thought women shouldn't write at all. Murasaki Shikibu disagreed, loudly and at length.

The civil war that brought Minamoto no Yoritomo to power was called the Genpei War, fought between the Minamoto and Taira clans from 1180 to 1185. It ended with the dramatic naval Battle of Dan-no-ura, where the Taira clan was destroyed. According to legend, the child emperor Antoku, just eight years old, drowned in the battle. His grandmother jumped into the sea holding the boy rather than let him be captured. The crabs of the Dan-no-ura Strait

are said to have faces on their shells that look like samurai warriors. Local fishermen used to throw them back into the sea out of respect.



The emperor of Japan holds the world's oldest continuous hereditary monarchy. The current imperial family traces its lineage back to the first Emperor Jimmu, who supposedly took the throne in 660 BCE. However, historians date the reliable record to around 300 CE. Either way, the Japanese imperial family has been on the throne, in some form, for somewhere between 1,700 and 2,600 years. By contrast, British royal family, which people often consider ancient, has existed only since 1066 CE. You might say that the Japanese imperial family makes the British royals look like a startup company.



Japan's emperors were sacred but gradually lost real power to noble families and military leaders called samurai. The Fujiwara clan ran Japan for 300 years by controlling who married into the imperial family. When samurai clans grew powerful enough, they took control outright, and in 1185, Minamoto no Yoritomo became the first Shogun. Minamoto set up a military government that would shape Japan for the next seven centuries. Meanwhile, the emperor kept his throne and his garden. The

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