

## CHAPTER 8 | LESSON 1 Land of the Rising Sun

## Prince Shotoku: Crown Prince of Japan

*Prince Shotoku (A.D. 574–622) was the son of an emperor. He ruled as regent during the reign of Empress Suiko and created a constitution still honored by Japan’s government.*

Shotoku was born in ancient Japan in A.D. 574. Although he was an imperial prince, he was not in line to become emperor. Instead, he became Crown Prince and Regent during the reign of Empress Suiko, his aunt. This position placed Shotoku in control of the Japanese government. His achievements and influence were great and long lasting.

**An Unusual Name** “Shotoku” was the prince’s ruling name. His real name, Umayato, meant “stable door.” His unusual name came from the fact that his mother had given birth while visiting the royal stables. Shotoku was born in front of a stable door. According to legend, he was able to speak immediately. This is one of many stories told about him. He also supposedly had the ability “to listen to what ten people were saying, all speaking at once” and “to predict the future.”

Shotoku was born at a time when his country was made up of warring clans. He wanted to unify these many groups. One obstacle he faced was disagreement within the royal court about how Japan should be governed. Shotoku favored Umako, who wanted to build a state founded on Buddhism. Umako’s rival was Moriya. Prince Shotoku prayed for help to four Buddhist gods, the Guardian Kings. In return for their help, he promised to build a fine temple in their honor. When one of Shotoku’s soldiers killed Moriya, Shotoku kept his promise. He built the temple of the Four Guardians.

Buddhism and Chinese culture were the two great influences in Shotoku’s life. Buddhism had spread from China to Korea. From Korea, it arrived in Japan just before Shotoku was born. As a student, Shotoku learned about Buddhism. He also studied the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Later, he learned to read



and write kanji, the Chinese form of writing. As regent, he sent young men to China to learn more about that country. Largely as a result of his influence, many aspects of Chinese culture were introduced to Japan. They included weaving, medicine, shipbuilding, and astronomy.

**The Constitution and Official Rank** Shotoku spread the ideas of the Buddha and Confucius through the Seventeen-Article Constitution. Completed in A.D. 604, Shotoku’s document is different from most constitutions. It lists rules for acceptable behavior rather than explaining the government’s structure and laws. Many of its rules tell officials how to achieve good government, but the advice applies to others as well. For example, the Constitution advises officials to be fair and to reward those who do good works. It states that ministers and officials must behave properly in order to set a good example. It advises consulting with others before making important decisions. The articles state that officials should come to work early and stay late. One rule says that forced labor should only be required in the off-season.

## HISTORY MAKERS: PRINCE SHOTOKU CONTINUED

Otherwise, people will not be able to plant and harvest their crops or tend to the silkworms that supply fiber for clothing.

The Constitution reflects what Shotoku believed was important. The first article states that “harmony should be valued and quarrels should be avoided.” Another addresses the need for self-control. Still another warns that envy must be avoided. The principles stated in Shotoku’s Constitution form the basis for Japanese imperial government. And they continue to be observed 1,400 years later.

Shotoku’s Constitution offered a single set of rules for officials to follow. This was a major step in centralizing the government. Shotoku also established a system of official rank. This system had 12 levels. It was based on talent, loyalty, and service. Rank was held for a generation and was not passed on. That way, more people had the opportunity to become part of the system.

**Builder of Temples** Shotoku established 46 Buddhist temples. Many of them were built in or near Nara, which was then the capital city. The first was the temple of the Four Guardians. It was composed of four institutions. Each aimed to better the lives of the Japanese people. The Welfare Institution, Hospital, and Pharmacy provided care and support to the needy. The Institution of Religion and Education currently houses the International Buddhist University. The other three institutions also remain active.

Shotoku built his second temple, Horyuji, in honor of his father, Emperor Yomei. The temple was founded in 607 in Nara, where Shotoku was born. Fire destroyed the temple in 1670, but it was rebuilt. Since then, additional fires caused damage to parts of the temple. In the 20th century, the government ordered major repairs that took 50 years to complete. Today Horyuji Temple is the world’s oldest existing wooden structure. The United Nations has designated the temple as a world heritage site.

Each temple built by Shotoku included facilities for the education and welfare of the people. The prince’s concern for his people

was also apparent in the many roads, moats, and other public works projects he developed.

**Scholar and Teacher** Shotoku was devoted to learning. He published scholarly works and lectured on a variety of subjects. These included history, geography, and astronomy. His complete *History of Japan* still serves as the basis for the study of Japanese history.

Shotoku was especially interested in the Buddhist *sutras*—stories that teach Buddhist philosophy. He sought to live according to Buddhist teachings. He tried to live simply and to attain perfection. He believed that his role was to help the Japanese people in any way that he could.

Prince Shotoku died in 622. He is buried in the town of Taishi, a name that means “prince.” Shotoku Taishi has been declared a Buddhist saint. On December 1, 1958, the Japanese government also honored Shotoku by putting his picture on its currency, the 10,000-yen note.

## Review Questions

1. Why did Shotoku build the temple of Four Guardians?
2. In what ways were the Buddhist temples that Shotoku built more than places of worship?
3. What influences shaped the content of Shotoku’s constitution?

## Critical Thinking

4. **Comparing and Contrasting** How is the Seventeen-Article Constitution different from most other constitutions?
5. **Evaluating** How well did Shotoku fulfill his desire to help the Japanese people? Give examples to support your answer.
6. **Analyzing Causes** Why might Shotoku have been made a Buddhist saint?