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Farris/Japan to 1600

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Introduction

This book examines the social and economic history of Japan from earliest times until 1600. Social and economic history encompasses numerous and diverse topics, including population and factors affecting mortality and fertility, specifically war, famine, disease, marriage, birth control, diet, and migration. The social and economic historian also investigates how people make a living and the technologies by which they do so. This book therefore addresses topics such as silk, cotton, and salt making; agriculture and fishing; ceramics; and construction. Another important economic sector includes commerce, markets, and money. Social history means the study of how society is organized and the relations among its members. It is concerned with class and family structures and experiences, life in villages and cities, gender relations, and the condition of children. Finally, social history takes into account material culture as represented by housing, sanitation, clothing, modes of transportation, and other ordinary hallmarks of everyday life. Taken together, these phenomena helped form the basis of daily life for people of all classes and regions in Japan from the prehistoric era through 1600. They interacted in complex ways with religious beliefs, political institutions, and ties to the outside world. The perspective of social and economic history on pre-1600 Japan is important in its own right, but also offers the basis for a more complete understanding of later periods. More broadly, it adds to human knowledge about the nature and diversity of global social and economic patterns.

English-language surveys of this long epoch in Japanese history have largely approached their subject through either elite cultural or political-institutional narratives. Although these approaches have contributed valuable insights, they offer, by virtue of their emphasis on the life of the privileged few, only a partial view of Japan's distant past. Fortunately, Japanese, American, and many other scholars have created a repository of excellent data and research on social and economic history, and I draw on this material to fill out the picture of Japan's society and economy.

In the following pages, I will trace two main themes, one economic and one social. In terms of the Japanese economy, I will describe how the residents of the

archipelago gradually moved from a forager-collector mode of subsistence to a more predominately agrarian base, supplemented by sophisticated industries and an advanced commercial economy. The transition from foraging to farming took place over many centuries, as persons moved back and forth from settled agriculture to older forager-collector regimes in response to ecological, political, and personal factors. Even in 1600, there remained a substantial portion of the population that never settled down to farm wet rice, as the governing elite desired.

At the level of society, this book will show how, as the population expanded over the last three thousand years, the social structure became increasingly complex, and occupational specialization and status divisions more intricate. In some ways, Japan has always been a land of diverse social categories, reflecting the islands' rich variety of landforms and flora and fauna and thus possibilities for subsistence. Particularly between 1300 and 1600, as the population grew relatively rapidly, the social structure became ever more elaborate. Along with this expanded social specialization came trends toward more tightly knit corporate organizations, whether in the village, city, market, or family. Along with this tendency toward higher levels of organization came transformations in gender relations and the situation of children.

The focus of this book is on continuity and change in social and economic structures and experiences in Japan until 1600. But, because the political approach has so dominated the historical narrative and because the economy, society, and political systems are so interwoven, I will begin most chapters with an outline of developments in the political system of that period. Readers will note that as the economy became more agrarian and commercial, and the social structure more complex, political organization also grew larger and more intricate so that, by 1600, the political elite was able to count on a bigger surplus of commoner produce and labor than ever before.

I will also take into account cultural phenomena, particularly religious beliefs. Just as culture is a reflection of social, economic, and political circumstances, religious sensibilities to some degree affect and are affected by the nature of the society and economy. There is never a simple relationship among all the various factors that make up history, whether material, institutional, or intellectual. Finally, I will address the growing connectedness between the residents of the archipelago and the rest of the world. It was once the conventional wisdom that Japan produced a unique culture because of its isolation. Today, it is generally acknowledged that it can be more helpful to conceive of Japan as a place where peoples, materials, and ideas—as well as other living things—converged and mixed. Residents of Japan constantly influenced and were influenced by neighbors and forces near and far, since prehistoric times.

I begin, as most historical surveys do, with the period leading up to about 600

common era (CE), tracing the development of certain basic structures—so-called building blocks—that were to last for a millennium and longer. Here I will examine the shifting geographical and ecological context, the advent of hunter-fisher-gatherer society, the gradual and incomplete transition to agriculture (particularly wet-rice cultivation), and the slow evolution of a political consciousness under the Yamato confederation centered in the Kyoto-Osaka-Nara region (the Kinai). I next look at the epoch from the early 600s until 800, a stressful time that witnessed a gradual cessation of socioeconomic growth due to numerous factors, including foreign wars and the threat of invasion, the arrival of an East Asian pandemic, the shortcomings of early agriculture, and galloping inflation by century's end. The population of approximately six million formed a social structure resembling a pointed pyramid, with the political and social elite at the top and a hard lot for commoners and slaves on the bottom. For society as a whole, kinship was flexible. Households were typically nuclear, and the customs of marriage ill defined, commonly allowing for multiple sexual liaisons for most males and females. Women played critical roles both at home and at work.

Quantitative standstill was the rule for the next two phases, the first covering 800–1050 and the second 1050–1180. Both were ages of declining or stable population, in part because of the ongoing effects of repeated plagues. This demographic situation was exacerbated by a hot and often drought-ridden climate and extensive ecological damage to the forests of the Kinai. These environmental drawbacks left many fields without water and caused harvests to fail about once every three years. A shortage of workers encouraged the adoption of labor-saving technologies in industry, cities shrank or disappeared, and the economy demonetized, especially during the initial phase. Under these pressures, the social structure became increasingly unbalanced, with a larger and more exalted elite created by rank inflation and differential mortality rates. The expanded ruling group tried, often in vain, to secure its tribute items from a disproportionately small, mobile, and uncooperative commoner class. During 1050–1180, the ruling class grew even larger to comprise a full-fledged trifunctional elite—civil aristocracy, religious organizations, and a military class. These groups functioned within a reformed political system headed by a retired emperor. Except for signs of a rebound in commerce due to the stimulus of a dynamic Chinese economy, the islands' economy and society—agriculture, industry, fertility, mortality, life expectancy, kinship, the family, gender relations, and material culture—remained much as before.

The century from 1180 to 1280 was another stressful transitional time, featuring trends that were both familiar and novel. Strains were evident in all sectors, but perhaps most striking in the collapse of the unbalanced social pyramid during the civil war of 1180–1185, which created a warrior government in Kamakura. The climate became harsher, causing three major famines each lasting for multiple

years. Warriors became secure rent collectors whose abuse of cultivators provoked protests and led peasants to abscond from their lands. War, famine, and debt created a large class of slaves, and many impoverished families disintegrated or were forced to abandon their children. Ecological and economic stresses and the political and social upheaval during this time gave rise to an uneasy sense among some that the last chance for religious salvation was slipping away (“The Latter Age of the Buddhist Law”). Not all trends, however, were negative. Especially after 1250, there were new, more salutary approaches to farming, epitomized by the spread of double-cropping and more productive use of dry fields and a steady expansion and monetization of the commercial network, giving rise to more cities and markets.

Beginning about 1280 and lasting until 1600, socioeconomic growth and change were the watchwords, taking place in two stages. Population grew by sixty-seven percent, to about ten million in 1450 and then to between fifteen and seventeen million around 1600. Political instability marked these growth stages, especially during the Warring States’ Era from 1450 through 1590. The all-out warfare dominating this latter period was especially costly. Mortality climbed in many places, provoked by harvest failure and the arrival of at least one new disease (syphilis). Many women, especially those in the elites, slowly lost their previously high status, as well as the ability to inherit and manage property, in male-dominated stem households. Greater wifely security, though, may have compensated for the loss of status, to a degree. Agrarian growth was evident in better irrigation engineering, the more widespread employment of double cropping, and the introduction and diffusion of a hardier species of rice from Southeast Asia. During this time, the proportion of “floating” people, or foragers, dropped to the lowest percentage ever in Japan. Evidence of the benefits to society can be seen in the incorporation of tightly knit villages, increasingly stable peasant families with a considerable patrimony, and lower infant mortality. The development of a full-fledged money economy was but one factor contributing to marked gains in most peoples’ material life. Beginning in 1590, the settlement negotiated by the political elite with the peasantry and other social classes, which had resisted the armies and their tactics of pillage and plunder, led to the greatest political stability the residents of the archipelago had ever known. The Tokugawa system laid the groundwork for the beginning of a new era, marked initially by continued population increase, economic prosperity, and further social specialization.

Years of research in Japanese primary and secondary sources, along with teaching experience, inform the content of this textbook. I have benefited greatly from the growing and sophisticated corpus of work by my English-speaking colleagues in different disciplines. Many observations made throughout this volume originated with others, and I have tried to synthesize these with my own under-

standing of how Japan's society and economy developed. Because of my desire to create a simple narrative appealing to students and general readers, I have not cited specific references at all points. Only where I use another scholar's ideas, or otherwise owe a substantial debt to another's work, have I provided a citation. For further guidance, readers may consult the brief essay at the end of the book suggesting specific English-language readings.