

## WHAT IS KOJIKI?



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*Kojiki* is not only Japan's oldest surviving historical record, but also the country's oldest surviving written work. Organized into three volumes, *Kojiki* is regarded as an official historical record that was researched and compiled by public officials and completed in the Nara period.

Volume 1 of *Kojiki* includes a preface and covers Japanese history from the time of the creation of the Japanese islands by deities. Volume 2 covers Japanese history starting from the reign of Emperor Jimmu (believed to be the first sovereign of Japan) until the reign of Emperor Ojin (the 15th sovereign). Volume 3 continues from the reign of Emperor Nintoku (the 16th sovereign) and finishes with the reign of Empress Suiko (the 33rd sovereign, the country's first female sovereign).

Volume 1 introduces mythology explaining the origins of Japan, the deities involved in the creation of Heaven and Earth, as well as the creation of the islands of Japan. Volumes 2 and 3 cover history, introducing various events and anecdotes from the reigns of each Emperor/Empress and his/her family tree. The writing style is a unique combination of dialogue, verse, narrative, and commentary, often directly from the people appearing in the stories.

Similar to Greek and Roman mythology, stories from *Kojiki* are rich with intrigue and compelling drama that many readers from other countries will enjoy.

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## KOJIKI Q&A

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### *Where was Kojiki created?*

*Kojiki* was completed in Nara after Heijyokyo Palace was established as Japan's first permanent capital. The site of Heijyokyo Palace, the grave of O no Yasumaro (editor of *Kojiki*), and other sites related to *Kojiki* still exist in Nara.

At the time, Nara was referred to as Yamato, but the meaning of "Yamato" changed over time as imperial control expanded. Eventually, use of the term "Yamato" became synonymous with the nation of Japan.

"Yamato" in the stories of *Kojiki* can refer to Nara or to a larger area.

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### *Who created Kojiki and when?*

According to the preface of *Kojiki*, its production actually began under Emperor Tenmu in the late 7th century at Asuka Palace in the Asuka area of present day Nara Prefecture. This was years before Heijokyo had been established.

Hieda no Are, a servant of Emperor Tenmu who had an excellent memory, was assigned to compile a new historical record. Hieda no Are began reading and memorizing important records and gathering stories from oral tradition, but the project was left unfinished when Emperor Tenmu passed away.

In the fall of 711 A.D., after the political climate stabilized and the new capital had been established at Heijokyo in Nara, Empress Genmei decided to resume the work of creating a new historical record, out of respect for the wishes of Emperor Tenmu, her uncle and father-in-law. O no Yasumaro, who was in charge of cultural affairs at the palace, was assigned to complete the historical record. O no Yasumaro spent four months editing the material that Hieda no Are had gathered. He then presented it as *Kojiki* in three volumes to Empress Genmei.

Unfortunately, all original copies of *Kojiki* have been lost. The oldest known surviving copy is from the late 14th century.

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### *Why was Kojiki created?*

In the work's preface, O no Yasumaro explains why *Kojiki* was created, quoting the words of Emperor Tenmu: *"There have been many falsifications in the records of the Imperial Family Tree and in the history books kept by numerous clans. Unless we resolve this situation soon, the true history will be lost forever. Lineages form the core of the Imperial system, so it is my desire to remove faulty information and thereby create a true historical account for future generations."*

The truth of the matter is that many historical records relating to the imperial lineage had been lost during the civil wars of the 7th century. This might explain why Emperor Tenmu felt the need to establish a new official historical record.

Emperor Tenmu rose to power by defeating his enemies in the Jinshin Disturbance, which followed the death of his brother, Emperor Tenchi. The majority of historians believe that Emperor Tenmu wanted to compile a new official history to strengthen his claim and show future generations that he was the rightful successor to the throne.

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## *How was Kojiki written?*

People in Japan have been speaking some form of the Japanese language since ancient times. However, for many years the language was devoid of a written form. The modern Japanese writing system that uses the phonetic syllabaries of *hiragana* and *katakana* along with *kanji* (adopted Chinese characters) had not been formulated in the Nara period.

At the time *Kojiki* was created, official records were written in *kanbun* style, in which kanji are mostly used as ideograms to convey meaning but also, on occasion, to represent sounds. *Kojiki* was written in this way.

O no Yasumaro laments the difficulty of writing in this manner: “*It is difficult to write accounts of events that took place in ancient Japan using only kanji. Some kanji are used to convey meaning, while other kanji are used to show how to pronounce a word. I have added notes where it is difficult to distinguish and understand.*”

As *Kojiki* was written in a totally different style from modern Japanese, Japanese people today find *Kojiki* extremely difficult to read without numerous footnotes and translations into modern Japanese.

Even so, *Kojiki* has never lost popularity, because the stories are profound and fascinating. In Japan, studying *Kojiki* became very popular in the 18th century. Many translations have been made into modern Japanese, and numerous books related to *Kojiki* have also been published. There are currently more than ten different translations into modern Japanese on the market.

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## *Notes on the Translation of Selected Stories from Kojiki*

*Kojiki* is well known in Japan. Nearly all Japanese have read or heard many of the anecdotes it contains. Especially in recent years, *Kojiki* has been gaining popularity as an entertaining way to learn about Japan’s origins and history. Even so, in other countries *Kojiki* is relatively unknown.

The first complete English translation was published in 1887, and several other translations have followed. These translations are mainly academic works intended for scholars and students of Japanese literature, history, and religion. In addition, most of the names of people and places were translated to reflect the meaning of the names in the ancient text. However, because each translator had a different interpretation and understanding of the meaning of the names, they vary greatly among translations.

Our intention here is to introduce the essence of *Kojiki* in easy-to-read English, so that readers can understand and enjoy it even if they are not familiar with Japanese history, culture, and geography.

Many of the people and deities that appear in *Kojiki* have long and unfamiliar names if transliterated. However, rather than using translations, we have transliterated the names to match what people will find in other publications and signage at visitor sites around Nara. In cases where it will help readers to better understand the stories, we have added a translation of the meaning of the name in parentheses.

From the three volumes of *Kojiki*, we have selected twenty stories that relate to important tourist destinations in Nara. As a historical work covering an extended period of time, *Kojiki* often has lengthy explanations of lineage and genealogy for the emperors and nobles appearing in the stories. We have not included these passages as general readers would find them tedious. The stories from *Kojiki* included here are simplifications of the originals.