

Empress Suiko

554–628



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Suiko was the first woman recorded to be ruler of Japan. She was a devout Buddhist and it was during her reign that Buddhism was established in Japan.



As you read the biography below, think about Suiko's actual role as reigning empress.

Empress Suiko was the first woman in recorded history to rule Japan. She became empress at the age of 18 when she married emperor Bidatsu. When Bidatsu died, Suiko's brother Sujun became emperor. Sujun reigned from 588 to 593, when he was murdered in 593. With Sujun's death, Suiko was appointed empress.

Suiko's becoming the ruling empress was a great break with Japanese tradition. For several hundred years before Suiko, all Japanese rulers had been men. In fact Bidatsu had several sons who could have been named emperor. Instead, because of the influence of her uncle Soga Umako, who was the head of the powerful Soga family, Suiko became empress. She was the first of eight reigning empresses.

Soga Umako had ordered the murder of Suiko's brother, the emperor, and put Suiko on the throne. He then named a prince regent, Shotoku Taishi, as Suiko's administrator. Suiko became a figurehead for Soga Umako and Shotoku Taishi, who actually ran the government.

Suiko came from a Buddhist family. She herself was a devout Buddhist. During her reign, Buddhism spread widely throughout Japan.



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VOCABULARY

bureaucratic relating to a system of government administration

During Suiko's rule, Japan changed in many other ways. China recognized Japan diplomatically. Chinese influence in Japan increased. Some features of Chinese culture, such as Chinese art, the Chinese calendar, and the **bureaucratic** system, were adopted by Japan. Although many of these changes took place due to Prince Shotoku's efforts, Suiko did rule with him as empress for 30 years. Suiko died a natural death in 628.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Explain** How did Suiko become empress when all the rulers before her had been men?

2. **Contrast** How did Suiko's power differ from Shotoku's?

3. **Evaluate** Why did Suiko's uncle appoint her as empress?

ACTIVITY

Empress Suiko was a figurehead for Soga Umako and prince regent Shotoku. How do you think Suiko felt about that? What were the advantages and disadvantages of being a figurehead? Write a short story from Suiko's point of view, expressing her feelings about her situation.