Samurai Life in Medieval Japan

The Heian period (794-1185) was followed by 700 years of warrior governments—the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Tokugawa. The civil government at the imperial court continued, but the real rulers of the country were the military daimyō class. You will be using art as a primary source to learn about samurai and daimyō life in medieval Japan (1185-1603).

Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

The Kamakura period was the beginning of warrior class rule. The imperial court still handled civil affairs, but with the defeat of the Taira family, the Minamoto under Yoritomo established its capital in the small eastern city of Kamakura. Yoritomo received the title shogun or “barbarian-quelling generalissimo.” Different clans competed with one another as in the Hōgen Disturbance of 1156 and the Heiji Disturbance of 1159.

The Heiji Monogatari Emaki is a hand scroll showing the armor and battle strategies of the early medieval period. The conflict at the Sanjō Palace was between Fujiwara Nobuyori and Minamoto Yoshitomo. As you look at the scroll, notice what people are wearing, the different roles of samurai and foot soldiers, and the different weapons. What can you learn about what is involved in this disturbance? What can you learn about the samurai and the early medieval period from viewing this scroll? What information is helpful in developing an accurate view of samurai? What preparations would be necessary to fight these kinds of battles? (Think about the organization of people, equipment, and weapons; the use of bows, arrows, and horses; use of protective armor for some but not all; and the different ways of fighting.)

During the Genpei Civil War of 1180-1185, Yoritomo fought against and defeated the Taira, beginning the Kamakura Period.

The Battles of Ichinotani and Yashima screens were painted in the seventeenth century but highlight the bravery, loyalty, and strategy of the Genpei War battles at Ichinotani and Yashima. Notice the use of horse and bow. What information here informs your understanding of what a samurai does?

Yoritomo chose officials called shugo (military governors) in each province to be responsible for military control of the provinces, to supervise the land, and to collect taxes. Obligation and dependency between shogun and military governors became the basis for the governing system until the end of the nineteenth century. As the shugo gained power and no longer acted only on behalf of the shogun, they evolved into the daimyō of the late fifteenth century. It also should be clarified that only about 10 percent of the population were of this warrior culture. Most Japanese at the time were farmers.
Daily Life: War and Play

In this early medieval period, wealth and leadership shifted away from the emperor and nobility to the warrior government. In order to govern, the shugo had to blend military and civilian arts. They may have conquered brutally, but shugo could not administer without the prestige of culture. A common saying was, “the warrior needs to master the bow and the horse as well as the brush and the word.” Shugo had to write correspondence and documents to deal with legal matters and to govern. Leisure time was influenced by the arts and Zen Buddhism. Shugo wrote poetry, practiced calligraphy, studied Buddhist sutras. Some painted while others appreciated art. Buddhist monks, especially the Zen Buddhists, became their teachers and cultural guides. The monks’ role as advisors and friends became important to the warrior elite and influenced the cultural traditions and activities of later daimyō.

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Along the road  
Smoke from Mt Fuji  
Could not be distinguished  
In a sky  
Of unbroken cloud.
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A *waka* (Japanese poem) by Shogun Yoritomo, quoted in *Japan: The Shaping of Daimyō Culture*

Military Skills and Preparation

Early medieval warriors depended on the bow and the horse. Mounted archery, called *yabusame*, was a skill samurai practiced to stay battle-ready. *Yabusame* also taught the samurai focus and discipline. The bows were large; the more men it took to string the bow, the stronger the samurai. Tales speak of heroic men who used bows that took seven men to string!

Study the pictures of current bows made to copy those of the past.

Worrisome Political Realities

In the beginning, warrior society was founded on family ties. Samurai or vassals would serve a *shugo* in return for land or reward. This idealized relationship meant a vassal would be loyal for a lifetime and even be prepared to die for his lord. This ideal could not really exist because a warrior had to earn a living, and allegiance to a losing lord meant losing your means of making a living. Choosing the right alliances and being on the winning side meant more reward and fame. Alliances sometimes changed in battles. Brothers were known to kill brothers and sons their fathers if it furthered their power. The *shugo*, and later the *daimyō*, changed their loyalties based on favorable outcomes.
We learn about this early medieval time period from a genre of literature called the war tales. These stories are a mixture of fact and fiction. They were originally sung by balladeers. The *Hōgen Monogatari*, *Heiji Monogatari*, and *The Tale of the Heike* are among the stories of the battles during the Kamakura. Although they were written 200 years later, they tell heroic stories that reflect the values and ideals of the twelfth-century samurai.

End of the Kamakura Period

In 1274, the Kamakura shogunate faced two Mongol invasions. Luckily, both were unsuccessful due to typhoons that forced the Mongols to retreat. Some believed that the Shinto gods had sent these kamikaze (or divine winds). The shogunate was strained by preparing to fend off the Mongols. Many warriors were called in to help. When the second invasion in 1281 was thwarted, however, there was no way to reward the warriors.

Financial problems weakened the Kamakura government, and it ended when the Hōjō regents could not put down an uprising led by the emperor. The breakdown of imperial authority continued, even though the emperor still had legitimacy. A power struggle erupted between the Northern Court, as represented by the rival samurai family, the Ashikaga, and the Southern Court, who followed the emperor. Two imperial courts existed during 40 years of warfare between these two factions. It ended with the Ashikaga Yoshimitsu unifying the two courts.
Muromachi Period (1336-1573)

The Muromachi district of Kyoto became the capital for the second period in medieval Japanese history. This time period, called the Muromachi or Ashikaga Period (1336-1573), was marked by unrest, disturbances, and violent changes. Warfare destroyed cities and countryside. The shogun’s power was still based on the coalition of shugo who helped control land and the power in the provinces. The increased power made many of these warriors wealthy, and this period saw the development of feudal lords who were called daimyō. Their success depended on their military prowess and social connections.

Within their provinces, daimyō developed their own local rule. Samurai served a lord or shogun as long as they were rewarded well. The Ashikaga were not able to control the various provinces, so it was the daimyō who ruled the local population, often fighting over territory and allies. There were approximately 250 daimyō domains at the end of the Ashikaga Period.

Role of Religion

People distressed by the violence and death of the period were attracted to Buddhism, which offered salvation after death. Buddhism had been the religion of scholars and monks but became the religion of ordinary people during the Muromachi. Pure Land Buddhism, which assured salvation to all, became more popular. The impermanence of life, the changing alliances, and the uncertainty of the times gave Zen Buddhism great appeal to the warrior culture.

The popularity of Buddhist beliefs was reflected in the literature of the time. One such example is Essays in Idleness, written in the fourteenth century by Yoshida Kenkō.
Culture and Daily Life

The Ashikaga developed a brilliant culture in which the shogun, daimyō, and samurai became patrons of the arts. The military leaders were influenced by Zen Buddhism, which had a profound effect on the government, arts, and education of the warrior government. The tea ceremony, flower arranging, ink painting, contemplative gardens, and Noh theater provided peace in spite of the terrible warfare. The discipline to meditate, practice the arts, and live a life of humility and service fit the demands of a daimyō’s life. To be calm in the heat of battle and to achieve excellence in the arts were the requirements of the day. All this was at the heart of Zen.

Military Life in Muromachi

Most people are fascinated by the violence and traditions of the warrior life of the samurai and daimyō. Most are aware of ritual suicide (seppuku, also known as hara-kiri, literally “cutting the stomach”) but don’t realize that the stomach was believed to be where the spirit or soul lived. Seppuku was a form of purification, a way to save one’s honor and accept responsibility for an error. Everyone recognizes the traditional samurai armor and sword. The long and short swords were prized possessions believed to have spiritual powers. Depending on the soldier’s wealth and status, the weapons, armor, and skills differed.

The way of the horse and bow were the most common forms of fighting for the wealthiest samurai and daimyō. With the invention of the stirrup, the best fighters increased speed, mobility, and range. Foot soldiers used shields, the yari (spear), and the naginata (curve-bladed spear). Warriors did not use shields on horseback because they could not shoot arrows. Body armor and the helmet deflected arrows but were not enough protection against swords. When the musket was introduced to Japan under Oda Nobunaga, it became the weapon of choice.

Honor, fame, and reward depended on who was killing whom. Name-announcing before fighting became important to insure people of equal rank and worthiness were fighting each other. Warriors also stated their age, rank, family lineage, and great achievements of themselves and their ancestors. Fighting a warrior beneath one’s status offered no monetary reward or honor.

Here is an example of name announcing: We are Oba no Heida Kageyoshi and Oba no Saburo Kagechika, residents of Sagami province and the sons of Oba no Shoji Kagefusa. We are also descendants in the fourth generation of Kamakura no Gongoro Kagemasa. At the time of the storming of the Kanazawa Stockade by Lord Hachiman (Yoshie) in the Later Three Years War, Kagemasa, who is now revered as a god, was only a youth of sixteen. When shot in the right eye with an arrow, Kagemasa, without even removing the arrow, shot an “answering arrow” and killed an enemy. Thus did he bequeath his name to posterity.

Excerpted from Hōgen Monogatari: Tale of the Disorder in Hōgen, translated by William Wilson
Momoyama Period (1573-1603)

The end of the Muromachi came when increasing rivalries between daimyō played out in the Onin War (1467-1477). Kyoto was destroyed, and the country spent the next hundred years in chaos known as the Sengoku or Warring States Period.

The Momoyama Period or Momoyama-Azuchi Period reunited Japan after these years of civil war. Over time, three generals worked to limit the powers of the daimyō and end the constant warfare between families and provinces.

Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) expelled the last Ashikaga shogun and began the restoration of order after centuries of war. His castle was built at Azuchi and became the model for huge structures to protect and defend the daimyō. Firearms, which had arrived with the Portuguese in 1543, influenced Nobunaga’s policies. He was known for brutally eliminating his rivals by any means necessary including burning temples, killing innocent civilians, and assassination.

Nobunaga’s leading general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, finalized the reunification of the country. He defeated some daimyō, and made alliances with others so that he became the most powerful man in the land. All recognized his preeminence. Hideyoshi made some major changes, including forcing all non-samurai to give up their weapons, He introduced a class system and limited Chinese and Dutch to trading in Nagasaki in southern Japan. The Portuguese and Spanish were banned from Japan for proselytizing.

Leading a Cultured Life

Zen Buddhism continued its influence on the culture of daimyō Japan in the Momoyama period. The rituals and ceremonies, the discipline and meditation, were important to cultural life and training for warfare. Momoyama art was lavish, however, not the rustic simplicity of earlier medieval style. Everything was grand, opulent, and rich. Gold leaf, gold pigment, and lacquer decorated walls and screens.

Hideyoshi was a student of Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), the most revered Japanese tea master. Rikyū formalized the tea ceremony with rules for behavior focusing on four basic Buddhist principles of harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. He also designed a simple building to house the ceremony based on a typical Japanese farmer’s rustic hut. Tatami or rush mats were used for flooring. Shoji, sliding screens made of paper and wood, divided the rooms. The tokonoma, the ceremonial alcove, was carefully decorated with a seasonally appropriate hanging scroll and flower arrangement for the enjoyment and consideration of the guests.

The teahouse and equipment used in tea ceremony were prized possessions of daimyō and samurai. Study the map of the tea room layout. Many architectural features of the teahouse exist today in Japanese homes. Check out the pictures of a tea bowl, bamboo tea spoon, and water jar.
Even the tea ceremony was made into a luxurious event under Hideyoshi, whose gold teahouse and tea bowls were used in a tea ceremony for Kyoto’s whole population. Still there was a place for Zen contemplation as reflected in a poem by Hideyoshi.

When tea is made with water drawn from the depths of mind
Whose bottom is beyond measure,
We really have what is called cha-no-yu.

A poem by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, quoted in Zen and Japanese Culture

The interest in the arts legitimized the daimyō’s and samurai’s political and military rule. Daimyō built teahouses, perfected the formal actions of the tea ceremony, and displayed prized imported tea bowls and utensils. The daimyō might attend a party where he would compete in identifying incense and tea, as well as recite waka (Japanese poems) or renga (linked poems created by a group of people, each contributing two to three lines).

Daimyō continued military training. They also used their wealth to build castles for defense and to demonstrate their power and ambition. Castle towns developed to serve their needs. This created a flourishing economy of merchants and new classes.

Look at pictures of the Himeji Castle. What would it be like to live here? If you were the daimyō, how would living here affect your daily life? Why would a town surrounding your castle be important?

One purpose of large castles was for defense. Another defensive technology of the Momoyama period was armor. Examine the pictures of Momoyama period armor.

The end of the Muromachi is best represented in a famous poem that compares the three shogun of the Muromachi. The actions of the brutal Nobunaga are described in the first line, Hideyoshi is characterized in the second, and Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the next period in Japanese history known for his perseverance, is the person of the third line.

If the cuckoo does not sing, kill it.
If the cuckoo does not sing, coax it.
If the cuckoo does not sing, wait for it.

Ultimately, Tokugawa Ieyasu ended the warfare and his rule began what is considered the early modern period. The samurai and daimyō continued into the Tokugawa era, but their roles changed with 250 years of no war. The endless civil wars were finally over, and Japan turned to a time of increased urbanization, peace, and growth of the merchant class.

References