

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*.

Along the road
Smoke from Mt Fuji
Could not be distinguished
In a sky
Of unbroken cloud.

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.

Heroic Values

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.

“Friends and foes alike wet their sleeves with tears and said

“What a pity! Tadanori was a great general,
Pre-eminent in the arts of both sword and poetry.”

Yorimasa summoned Watanabe Chujitsu Tonau and ordered: “Strike off my head.” Tonau could not bring himself to do this while his master was still alive. He wept bitterly. “How can I do that, my lord?” he replied. “I can do so only after you have committed suicide.” “I understand,” said Yorimasa. He turned to the west, joined his palms, and chanted “Hail Amidha Buddha” ten times in a loud voice. Then he composed this poem:

Like a fossil tree
Which has borne not one blossom
Sad has been my life
Sadder still to end my days
Leaving no fruit behind me.

Having spoken these lines, he thrust the point of his sword into his belly, bowed his face to the ground as the blade pierced him through, and died. Tonau took up his master’s head and, weeping, fastened it to a stone. Then, evading the enemy, he made his way to the river and sank it in a deep place.

Excerpted from *The Tale of the Heike*

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.

Find the view of a warrior fighting the Mongols. Takezaki Suenaga had handscrolls painted to glorify his bravery and to identify his contribution to the defense of his country. He hoped he would be richly awarded for his efforts. Notice his armor, weapons, and horse. The exploding item is an invention of the Mongols.

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.

Samurai House Rules

I. First of all, you should believe in the Buddha(s) and the Gods.

VII. You should do your hair early [as soon as you rise]. I need not tell you that this rule applies when you are to attend on your lord; but even when you must stay at home because you are not well or have urgent business to do, you should do your hair early, for you must not be seen in an ungroomed state by others.

XII. If you have a little leisure, read books. But hide your reading matter in your breast-fold; in general, you should not let people see you read. But whether in bed or up and about, you must always practice writing; otherwise, you will forget how to read and write characters.

XV. It is boorish and vile to have no poetic sensibility or skill, and you should study the art of poetry.

XVI. In your off-duty hours, practice riding. First you should become skilled in the essentials, and then practice the standard techniques for guiding the horse.

XXI. It is not necessary to write here about the “Arts of peace and War, including Archery and Horsemanship,” for to pursue these is a matter of course. From of old, the rule has been, “Practice the Arts of Peace on the left hand, and the Arts of War on the right.” Mastery of both is required.

Excerpted from “Hojo Soun’s Twenty-One Articles”

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.

Were we to live on forever—were the dews of Adashino never to vanish, the smoke on Toribeyama never to fade away—then indeed would men not feel the pity of things... Truly the beauty of life is its uncertainty.

Excerpted from *Essays in Idleness*, 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.

The rich cultural life of *daimyō* and samurai is reflected in some of Japan's cultural treasures. The shogun built villas, which eventually became temples. Many of these temples have been restored. The villas have beautiful gardens and Buddhist temples where Zen Buddhism inspired the architecture. Yoshimitsu, the third Ashikaga shogun, built the Golden Pavilion or Kinkakuji. Study the pictures of the Golden Pavilion. Another palace called the Silver Pavilion or Ginkakuji was the home of Ashkaga Yoshimasa. Study pictures of this place and its famous Zen rock garden, as well as photos of other Japanese rock gardens. Also examine the photographs of Noh theater. What do these cultural artifacts tell you about the everyday life of the warrior class?

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 (Yoshiie) 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 Hōgeni*, 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.

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