

Samurai of Ancient Japan

Contributed by Administrator
 Tuesday, 10 June 2008
 Last Updated Wednesday, 11 June 2008

Samurai (侍, Samurai?) is the term for the military nobility of pre-industrial Japan. The word samurai is derived from the archaic Japanese verb samorau, changed to saburau, meaning "to serve"; thus, a samurai is a servant, i.e. the servant of a lord.

History

It is believed warriors and foot-soldiers in the sixth century may have formed a proto-samurai class. Following a disastrous military engagement with Tang China and Silla, Japan underwent widespread reforms. One of the most important was that of the Taika Reform, issued by Prince Naka no Le (Emperor Tenji) in 646 AD. This edict introduced Chinese cultural practices and administrative techniques throughout the Japanese aristocracy and bureaucracy.

As part of the Taihō Code, of 702 AD and the later Yōmei Code,[2], the population was required to report regularly for census, which was used as a precursor for national conscription. With an understanding of how the population was distributed, Emperor Mommu introduced the law whereby 1 in 3–4 adult males were drafted into the national military. These soldiers were required to supply their own weapons, and in return were exempted from duties and taxes.

This was one of the first attempts by the Imperial government to form an organized army modelled after the Chinese system. It was called gundan-sei(団隊) by later historians and is believed to have been short lived.[citation needed]The Taihō Code classified Imperial bureaucrats into 12 ranks, each divided into two sub-ranks, 1st rank being the highest adviser to the emperor. Those of 6th rank and below were referred to as "samurai" and dealt with day-to-day affairs. Although these "samurai" were civilian public servants, the name is believed to have derived from this term. Military men, however, would not be referred to as "samurai" for many more centuries.[citation needed]In the early Heian period, the late 8th and early 9th centuries, Emperor Kammu (聖德太子) sought to consolidate and expand his rule in northern Honshū, but the armies he sent to conquer the rebellious Emishi people lacked motivation and discipline, and were unable to prevail.[citation needed] Emperor Kammu introduced the title of Seiitaishōgun (征夷大将軍) or shōgun, and began to rely on the powerful regional clans to conquer the Emishi.

Skilled in mounted combat and archery (kyūdō, 弓道), these clan warriors became the emperor's preferred tool for putting down rebellions.[citation needed] Although these warriors may have been educated, at this time (7th to 9th century) the Imperial court officials considered them to be little more than barbarians.[citation needed]Ultimately, Emperor Kammu disbanded his army, and from this time, the emperor's power gradually declined. While the emperor was still the ruler, powerful clans around Kyoto (京都) assumed positions as ministers, and their relatives bought positions as magistrates.[citation needed] To amass wealth and repay their debts, magistrates often imposed heavy taxes, resulting in many farmers becoming landless.[citation needed]As the threat of robbery rose, the clans began recruiting these exiles in the Kanto plains. Because of their intense training in the martial arts, they proved to be effective guards.

Small numbers would accompany tax collectors and, merely by their presence, deter thieves and bandits from attacking. They were saburai, armed retainers, yet their advantage of being the sole armed party quickly became apparent.[citation needed]Through protective agreements and political marriages, they accumulated political power, eventually surpassing the traditional aristocracy.

Some clans were originally formed by farmers who had taken up arms to protect themselves from the imperial magistrates sent to govern their lands and collect taxes.

These clans formed alliances to protect themselves against more powerful clans, and by the mid-Heian period they had adopted characteristic Japanese armour and weapons, and laid the foundations of Bushido, their ethical code. For most of samurai history, warriors described themselves as followers of Budo or Bushido and had a universal set of values derived from Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto. Families such as the Imagawa had large numbers of followers and broad influence and so their ethical code spread across the realm and were widely quoted by others. Kato Kiyomasa commanded over Japan's forces in Korea and therefore had a large influence over the other warrior families. By the 12th century, samurai were highly literate due to the general introduction of Confucianism from China during the 7th to 9th centuries, and aspired to the more cultured abilities of the nobility.

This was achieved because education was required and some lords ordered the men to be educated. Examples such as Taira Tadanori (a samurai who appears in the Heike Monogatari or "Tale of the Heike") demonstrate that some warriors idealized the arts and aspire to become skilled in them; Tadanori is famous for his skill with the pen and the sword or the "bun and the bu", harmony of fighting and learning. From the earliest Japanese writings such as the Kojiki, samurai were expected to be cultured and literate, and the ancient saying "Bun Bu Ryo Do" (文武両道, lit. literary arts, military arts, both ways) or "The pen and the sword in accord," was an ideal to which many aspired. The number of men who actually

achieved the ideal and lived their lives by it was high. By the time of the Meiji restoration, Japanese literacy rates were higher than European literacy rates. An early term for warrior, "uruwashii", was written with a kanji that combined the characters for literary study ("bun" 文) and military arts ("bu" 武), and is mentioned in the Heike Monogatari (late 12th century).

The Heike Monogatari makes reference to the educated poet-swordsman ideal in its mention of Taira no Tadanori's death: "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.'" According to William Scott Wilson in his book *Ideals of the Samurai*: "The warriors in the Heike Monogatari served as models for the educated warriors of later generations, and the ideals depicted by them were not assumed to be beyond reach. Rather, these ideals were vigorously pursued in the upper echelons of warrior society and recommended as the proper form of the Japanese man of arms. With the Heike Monogatari, the image of the Japanese warrior in literature came to its full maturity." Wilson then translates the writings of several warriors who mention the Heike Monogatari as an example for their men to follow. Plenty of warrior writings document this ideal from the 13th century onward.

Ashikaga Shogunate and the Feudal Period

Various samurai clans struggled for power during the Kamakura and Ashikaga Shogunates. Zen Buddhism spread among the samurai in the 13th century and helped to shape their standards of conduct, particularly overcoming fear of death and killing, but among the general populace, Pure Land Buddhism was favored. In 1274, the Yuan Dynasty of the Mongol Empire sent a force of some 40,000 men and 900 ships to invade Japan in northern Kyushu.

Japan mustered a mere 10,000 samurai to meet this threat. The invading army was harassed by major thunderstorms throughout the invasion, which aided the defenders by inflicting heavy casualties. The Yuan army was eventually recalled and the invasion called off. The Mongol invaders used small bombs, which was likely the first appearance of bombs and gunpowder in Japan. The Japanese defenders recognized the possibility of a renewed invasion, and began construction of a great, stone barrier around Hakata Bay in 1276. Completed in 1277, this wall stretched for 20 kilometers around the border of the bay. This would later serve as a strong defensive point against the Mongols.

The Mongols attempted to settle matters in a diplomatic way from 1275 to 1279, but every envoy sent to Japan was executed. This set the stage for one of the most famous engagements in Japanese history. In 1281, a Yuan army of 140,000 men with 4,400 ships was mustered for another invasion of Japan. Northern Kyushu was defended by a Japanese army of 40,000 men. The Mongol army was still on its ships preparing for the landing operation when a typhoon hit north Kyushu island. The casualties and damage inflicted by the typhoon, followed by the Japanese defense of the Hakata Bay barrier, resulted in the Mongols again recalling their armies. The thunderstorms of 1274 and the typhoon of 1281 helped the samurai defenders of Japan repel the Mongol invaders despite being vastly outnumbered.

These winds became known as kami-no-kaze, which literally translates as "wind of the gods." This is often given a simplified translation as "divine wind." The kami-no-kaze lent credence to the Japanese belief that their lands were indeed divine and under supernatural protection. In the 14th century, a blacksmith called Masamune developed a two-layer structure of soft and hard steel for use in swords. This structure gave much improved cutting power and endurance, and the production technique led to Japanese swords (katana) being recognized as some of the most potent hand weapons of pre-industrial East Asia. Many swords made using this technique were exported across the East China Sea, a few making their way as far as India. Issues of inheritance caused family strife as primogeniture became common, in contrast to the division of succession designated by law before the 14th century.

To avoid infighting, invasions of neighboring samurai territories became common and bickering among samurai was a constant problem for the Kamakura and Ashikaga Shogunates. The Sengoku jidai ("warring-states period") was marked by the loosening of samurai culture with people born into other social strata sometimes making names for themselves as warriors and thus becoming de facto samurai. In this turbulent period, bushido ethics became important factors in controlling and maintaining public order. Japanese war tactics and technologies improved rapidly in the 15th and 16th century. Use of large numbers of infantry called ashigaru ("light-foot," due to their light armour), formed of humble warriors or ordinary people with Nagayari (a long lance) or (Naginata), was introduced and combined with cavalry in maneuvers.

The number of people mobilized in warfare ranged from thousands to hundreds of thousands. The arquebus, a matchlock gun, was introduced by the Portuguese via a Chinese pirate ship in 1543 and the Japanese succeeded in assimilating it within a decade. Groups of mercenaries with mass-produced arquebuses began playing a critical role. By the end of feudal period, several hundred thousand firearms existed in Japan and massive armies numbering over 100,000 clashed in battles. By comparison, the largest and most powerful army in Europe, the Spanish, had only several thousand firearms and could only assemble 30,000 troops. In 1592, and again in 1598, Toyotomi Hideyoshi decided to invade China (eS) and sent to Korea an army of 160,000 samurai (Hideyoshi's invasions of Korea, ②•). Taking advantage of its mastery of the arquebus, Japanese samurai almost led the war to victory, but were unable to do so, due to the entry of

Ming Chinese troops. A few of the more famous samurai generals of this war were KatM Kiyomasa, Konishi Yukinaga, and Shimazu Yoshihiro. Social mobility was high, as the ancient regime collapsed and emerging samurai needed to maintain large military and administrative organizations in their areas of influence. Most of the samurai families that survived to the 19th century originated in this era, declaring themselves to be the blood of one of the four ancient noble clans, Minamoto, Taira, Fujiwara and Tachibana. In most cases, however, it is hard to prove these claims.

Kamakura Bakufu and the rise of Samurai

Originally the emperor and nobility employed these warriors. In time, they amassed enough manpower, resources and political backing in the form of alliances with one another, to establish the first samurai-dominated government. As the power of these regional clans grew, their chief was typically a distant relative of the emperor, and a lesser member of either the Fujiwara, Minamoto, or Taira clans. Though originally sent to provincial areas for a fixed four-year term as a magistrate, the toryo declined to return to the capital when their terms ended, and their sons inherited their positions and continued to lead the clans in putting down rebellions throughout Japan during the middle and later Heian period. Samurai fought at the naval battle of Dan-no-Ura in 1185. Because of their rising military and economic power, the warriors ultimately became a new force in the politics of the court.

Their involvement in the HMgen in the late Heian period consolidated their power, and finally pitted the rival Minamoto and Taira clans against each other in the Heiji Rebellion of 1160. The winner, Taira no Kiyomori, became an imperial advisor, and was the first warrior to attain such a position. He eventually seized control of the central government, establishing the first samurai-dominated government and relegating the emperor to figurehead status. However, the Taira clan was still very conservative when compared to its eventual successor, the Minamoto, and instead of expanding or strengthening its military might, the Taira clan had its women marry emperors and exercise control through the emperor. The Taira and the Minamoto clashed again in 1180, beginning the Gempei War which ended in 1185. The victorious Minamoto no Yoritomo established the superiority of the samurai over the aristocracy. In 1190, he visited Kyoto and in 1192, became Seii Taishogun, establishing the Kamakura Shogunate, or Kamakura Bakufu. Instead of ruling from Kyoto, he set up the Shogunate in Kamakura, near his base of power. "Bakufu" means "tent government," taken from the encampments the soldiers would live in, in accordance with the Bakufu's status as a military government.

Over time, powerful samurai clans became warrior nobility, or "buke", who were only nominally under the court aristocracy. When the samurai began to adopt aristocratic pastimes like calligraphy, poetry and music, some court aristocrats in turn began to adopt samurai customs. In spite of various machinations and brief periods of rule by various emperors, real power was now in the hands of the Shogun and the samurai.

Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu

Oda Nobunaga was the well-known lord of the Nagoya area (once called Owari Province) and an exceptional example of a samurai of the Sengoku Period. He came within a few years of, and laid down the path for his successors to follow, the reunification of Japan under a new Bakufu (Shogunate). Oda Nobunaga made innovations in the fields of organization and war tactics, heavily used arquebuses, developed commerce and industry and treasured innovation. Consecutive victories enabled him to realize the termination of the Ashikaga Bakufu and the disarmament of the military powers of the Buddhist monks, which had inflamed futile struggles among the populace for centuries.

Attacking from the "sanctuary" of Buddhist temples, they were constant headaches to any warlord and even the emperor who tried to control their actions. He died in 1582 when one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide, turned upon him with his army. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (see below) and Tokugawa Ieyasu, who founded the Tokugawa Shogunate, were loyal followers of Nobunaga. Hideyoshi was brought up from a nameless peasant to be one of Nobunaga's top generals and Ieyasu had shared his childhood with Nobunaga. Hideyoshi defeated Mitsuhide within a month and was regarded as the rightful successor of Nobunaga by avenging the treachery of Mitsuhide.

These two were gifted with Nobunaga's previous achievements on which build a unified Japan and there was a saying: "The reunification is a rice cake; Oda made it. Hashiba shaped it. At last, only Ieyasu tastes it." (Hashiba is the family name that Toyotomi Hideyoshi used while he was a follower of Nobunaga.) Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who became a grand minister in 1586, himself the son of a poor peasant family, created a law that the samurai caste became codified as permanent and hereditary, and that non-samurai were forbidden to carry weapons, thereby ending the social mobility of Japan up until that point, which lasted until the dissolution of the Edo Shogunate by the Meiji revolutionaries.

It is important to note that the distinction between samurai and non-samurai was so obscure that during the 16th century, most male adults in any social class (even small farmers) belonged to at least one military organization of their own and served in wars before and during Hideyoshi's rule. It can be said that an "all against all" situation continued for a century. The authorized samurai families after the 17th century were those that chose to follow Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and

Ieyasu. Large battles occurred during the change between regimes, and a number of defeated samurai were destroyed, went ronin or were absorbed into the general populace.

Tokugawa Shogunate

During the Tokugawa era, samurai increasingly became courtiers, bureaucrats, and administrators rather than warriors. With no warfare since the early 17th century, samurai gradually lost their military function during the Tokugawa era (also called the Edo period). By the end of the Tokugawa era, samurai were aristocratic bureaucrats for the daimyo, with their daisho, the paired long and short swords of the samurai (cf. katana and wakizashi) becoming more of a symbolic emblem of power rather than a weapon used in daily life.

They still had the legal right to cut down any commoner who did not show proper respect (kiri sute gomen (斬捨限)), but to what extent this right was used is unknown. When the central government forced daimyos to cut the size of their armies, unemployed ronin became a social problem. Theoretical obligations between a samurai and his lord (usually a daimyo) increased from the Genpei era to the Edo era. They were strongly emphasized by the teachings of Confucius and Mencius (ca 550 B.C.) which were required reading for the educated samurai class.

During the Edo period, after the general end of hostilities, the code of Bushido was formalized. It is important to note that bushido was an ideal, but that it remained uniform from the 13th century to the 19th century — the ideals of Bushido transcended social class, time and geographic location of the warrior class.

Bushido was formalized by samurai such as Imagawa Ryoshun as early as the 13th century. The conduct of samurai served as role model behavior for the other social classes. With time on their hands, samurai spent more time in pursuit of other interests such as becoming scholars. Bushido still survives in present-day Japanese society, as do many other aspects of the samurai's way of life.

Modernization of the samurai (1854-1868)

By this time, the Way of Death and Desperateness had been eclipsed by a rude awakening in 1853, when Commodore Matthew Perry's massive steamships from the U.S. Navy first imposed broader commerce on the once-dominant national policy of isolationism. Prior to that only a few harbor towns, under strict control from the Shogunate, were able to participate in Western trade, and even then, it was based largely on the idea of playing the Franciscans and Dominicans off against one another (in exchange for the crucial arquebus technology, which in turn was a major contributor to the downfall of the classical samurai).

From 1854, the samurai army and the navy were modernized. A Naval training school was established in Nagasaki in 1855. Naval students were sent to study in Western naval schools for several years, starting a tradition of foreign-educated future leaders, such as Admiral Enomoto. French naval engineers were hired to build naval arsenals, such as Yokosuka and Nagasaki. By the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867, the Japanese navy of the shogun already possessed eight western-style steam warships around the flagship Kaiyō Maru, which were used against pro-imperial forces during the Boshin war, under the command of Admiral Enomoto.

A French Military Mission to Japan (1867) was established to help modernize the armies of the Bakufu. The last showing of the original samurai was in 1867 when samurai from Chōshū and Satsuma provinces defeated the Shogunate forces in favor of the rule of the emperor in the Boshin War (1868-1869). The two provinces were the lands of the daimyo that submitted to Ieyasu after the Battle of Sekigahara (1600).

Decline during the Meiji Restoration (1868-)

Emperor Meiji abolished the samurai's right to be the only armed force in favor of a more modern, western-style, conscripted army in 1873. Samurai became Shizoku (士族) who retained some of their salaries, but the right to wear a katana in public was eventually abolished along with the right to execute commoners who paid them disrespect. The samurai finally came to an end after hundreds of years of enjoyment of their status, their powers, and their ability to shape the government of Japan. However, the rule of the state by the military class was not yet over.

In defining how a modern Japan should be, members of the Meiji government decided to follow the footsteps of United Kingdom and Germany, basing the country on the concept of "noblesse oblige." Samurai were not to be a political force under the new order. With the Meiji reforms in the late 19th century, the samurai class was abolished, and a western-style national army was established. The Imperial Japanese Armies were conscripted, but many samurai volunteered to be soldiers and many advanced to be trained as officers. Much of the Imperial Army officer class was of samurai origin and they were highly motivated, disciplined and exceptionally trained. The last samurai conflict was arguably in 1877, during the Satsuma Rebellion in the Battle of Shiroyama.

This conflict had its genesis in the previous uprising to defeat the Tokugawa Shogunate, leading to the Meiji Restoration. The newly formed government instituted radical changes, aimed at reducing the power of the feudal domains, including Satsuma, and the dissolution of samurai status. This led to the ultimately premature uprising, led by SaigM Takamori. Samurai were many of the early exchange students, not directly because they were samurai, but because many samurai were literate and well-educated scholars. Some of these exchange students started private schools for higher educations, while many samurai took pens instead of guns and became reporters and writers, setting up newspaper companies, and others entered governmental service. Only the name Shizoku existed after that. After Japan lost the World War II, the name Shizoku disappeared under the law on January 1, 1948.