

Medieval Japan

Samurai: Real and Imagined

The life and persona of the samurai are alive in popular imagination, but how well do they reflect historical accuracy? By comparing representations of the samurai in medieval Japan through art and literature, consider how our understanding of warrior culture compares to the reality of their daily lives.

Samurai (lit. “one who serves”) refers to members of Japan’s warrior class. The origins of the samurai can be traced to the eighth and ninth centuries, when large landholdings moved into the hands of the imperial family and related members of the aristocracy.

In the Heian period (794–1185), the Kyoto-based imperial court and nobles depended on the agricultural income from these landholdings, especially large private estates in northern Japan. The need to defend these distant estates from attacks by local chieftains led to the birth of the samurai. Nobles sent from the capital to govern the estates often lacked the skills and authority necessary to maintain security or provide effective administration in such remote districts, so the court appointed deputies from among the local population to assist them. Forerunners of the samurai, these deputies built local and regional power by creating privately controlled militias, called “warrior bands.”

Starting as little more than family organizations, warrior bands were initially formed for the duration of a military campaign. Afterward, the group was disbanded to allow the men to return to farming. By the eleventh century the bands were changing to groups of fighting men not necessarily connected through kinship. Power was beginning to aggregate in the hands of a few elite military families, or clans, whose regional dominance was supported by the fighting abilities of retainers and vassals. These were men bound to their lords by vows of loyalty and/or other contractual obligations, such as grants of land or income in exchange for military service.



Important Cultural Property (1 piece). Helmet, body-front, sleeve-front. Muromachi period/15th century. Donated by Akita Kazusue, Tokyo National Museum, F-20153. Image courtesy of Tokyo National Museum.

Grade 7 Common Core and Content Standards

HSS.7.5.3 Describe the values, social customs, and traditions prescribed by the lord-vassal system consisting of shogun, daimyo, and samurai and the lasting influence of the warrior code in the twentieth century.

HI: Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.

RH.6-8.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

RH.6-8.7. Integrate visual information with other information in print and digital texts.



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Battles at Ichi-no-tani and Yashima, from *The Tale of the Heike*, approx. 1650–1700. Japan. Edo period (1615–1868). Six-panel screen, ink and colors on gold. *Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B63D8.*

¹Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Tale of the Heike* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), 23.²Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Tale of the Heike* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), 316-317.

³ Christoffer Bovbjerg, trans., “*Goseibai Shikimoku: Hojo Yasutoki’s Warrior Law Code, 1232*” in “Warriors and the Law: The History of the Other ‘Warrior Code.’” presented at The Asian Art Museum, July 26, 2012.

⁴ Carl Steenstrup, trans. 1974. “Hojo Soun’s Twenty-One Articles. The Code of Conduct of the Odawara Hojo.” *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1974), 292-293, 298.

⁵ Yamaga Soko, Yamaga Soko bunshu, quoted in Ryusaku Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, editors. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 390.

Written by Dr. Laura Allen, Curator of Japanese Art, Asian Art Museum; Caren Gutierrez, Manager of School and Teacher Programs, Asian Art Museum; and Brendan Hurd, Teacher, Walnut Creek Intermediate School; in partnership with UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project and the Tokyo National Museum. Copyright Asian Art Museum, 2012.

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The Genpei War and First Warrior Government

By the late eleventh century, the Minamoto (also known as Genji) clan was recognized as the most powerful in the northeastern region of Japan, having defeated several other strong local groups. In the mid-twelfth century, the Minamoto clashed with the mighty Taira (also known as Heike) clan, which controlled an important western region including the area around Kyoto. A series of engagements, culminating in the Genpei War (1184–1185), ended with the defeat of the Taira.

The victorious Minamoto went on to establish a new, warrior-led government at Kamakura, their eastern stronghold. In 1185 the great Minamoto leader Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199) was appointed shogun by the emperor. Yoritomo established a military government (*bakufu*) appointing warriors to fill important regional posts as constables or military governors and land stewards. Reporting to the shogun were *daimyo*—provincial landowners who led bands of warrior vassals and administered the major domains.



From the thirteenth century on, Japan was ruled through a dual government structure. While the emperor retained cultural and religious sovereignty over the nation, the military elite during this period assumed political and economic leadership. This system of governance remained until the late 1800s.

The Tale of the Heike

At the end of the Heian period (794–1185), two warrior clans, the Minamoto (Genji) and the Taira (Heike) fought for control of Japan in the Genpei War. The rivalries of the two clans are described in the historical epic *The Tale of the Heike*.

“The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”¹

As the story opens, the Taira maintain power over the imperial throne under the leadership of Taira no Kiyomori. Facing shifting alliances, Kiyomori begins to act with ruthlessness, creating enemies in the process. In the beginning, the narrator tells how Kiyomori’s actions transgress the boundaries of honorable conduct. This section ends as Kiyomori, wracked by disease and fever, succumbs to a terrible illness. The second and third sections recount the struggle, intrigue, and finally the civil wars that ensued between the Minamoto and Taira clans after Kiyomori’s death. The tale ends with the total devastation of the Taira and the supremacy of the Minamoto, led by Minamoto Yoritomo.

The value of the Heike lies not only in its character as historical narrative describing battles and political intrigues but also in its lessons about samurai daily life, etiquette, and ethical values informed by the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of worldly phenomena. Itinerant singers transmitted the war tales orally, spreading stories of warriors’ loyalty, courage, and virtue throughout the country.

The scene depicted on this folding screen may be regarded as presenting an ideal version of the samurai code of conduct, or *bushido*. By illustrating the desirable aspects of warrior behavior in an entertaining form, the artist helped to promote these principles in an era, the Edo period (1615–1868), approximately five hundred years after *The Tale of the Heike* was written, when samurai were not often called upon to use their weapons.

Portraying the Ideal Warrior in Art and Literature

Compare the famous excerpt of the Battle at Yashima (1185) from *The Tale of the Heike* with the painting of the Battles at Ichi-no-tani and Yashima, from *The Tale of the Heike*. What do the painting and story tell us about the characteristics of an ideal warrior?



Battles at Ichi-no-tani and Yashima (detail; B63D8+).

“Naozane beckoned to him with his fan. Thus challenged, the warrior turned his horse around.... As Naozane...removed his helmet to cut off his head, he saw before him the...face of a boy no more than sixteen or seventeen. Looking at this face, he recalled his son, Naoie.... Naozane...thought to himself: “...Even when I saw that my son, Naoie, was slightly wounded, I could not help feeling misery. How much more painful it would be if this young warrior’s father heard that he had been killed. I must spare him!”

Looking over his shoulder, he saw a group of his comrades galloping toward them...“Though I wish to spare your life, a band of my fellow warriors is approaching...” To this, the young warrior replied simply: “Then take off my head at once!” So pitiable an act was it that Naozane could not wield his blade...His heart sank. However, unable to keep the boy in this state any longer, he struck off his head.

Frenzied with grief, Naozane wept until the tears rushed down his cheeks. “Nothing is so bitter as to be born into a military family! Were I not a warrior, I should not have such sorrow! What a cruel act this is!” He covered his face with the sleeves of his armor and wept...Then,...he found a flute in a brocade bag tucked into a sash around the boy’s waist. ... Naozane, grieved by the death of this young lord and moved by the memory of the gentle flute music, decided to give up his life as a warrior and lead a religious life, following the way of the Buddha.”²

	CHARACTERISTICS OF AN IDEAL WARRIOR	EVIDENCE
PAINTING		
STORY		

Samurai Values: Comparing Perspectives from the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo Periods

Compare three warrior codes from different times to understand the role and values of the samurai. Then, compare and contrast these codes with representations of samurai in art and literature.

<p>How would you describe an ideal samurai warrior?</p>		
<p>Kamakura Period (1185–1333 CE) Minamoto Shogunate</p> <p>“Article 5: Collecting Land Tax</p> <p>If an estate holder accuses a jito (person appointed by warrior government to police and defend an estate) of detaining more than his share of the land tax, the accounts will be audited and if the jito is found at fault, he must repay what is owed immediately or within three years if the sum is excessively large. If the jito goes against these provisions, he will be removed from his position.”³</p>	<p>Muromachi Period (1336–1573 CE) Ashikaga Shogunate</p> <p>“As for swords and clothes, you should not try to look splended when you appear before others. To think that one’s plain possessions are a dishonor and borrow others is needless ostentation, and invites ridicule... Seek good friends, such are to be found among those who study penmanship and read books.”⁴</p>	<p>Edo Period (1615–1868 CE) Tokugawa Shogunate</p> <p>“The business of the samurai consists in reflecting on his own station in life, in discharging loyal service to his master if he has one, in deepening his fidelity in associations with friends, and, with due consideration of his own position, in devoting himself to duty above all.”⁵</p>
<p>In the Kamakura period, an ideal warrior:</p>	<p>In the Muromachi period, an ideal warrior:</p>	<p>In the Edo period, an ideal warrior:</p>
<p>Compare and contrast representations of the ideal warrior in the warrior codes with the art and literature of <i>The Tale of the Heike</i>. Why do you think they are so idealized? Bonus: Compare with a representation of samurai in contemporary popular culture.</p>		