

The Rise of the Warrior Class in Japan

Introduction:

During the Heian period, Japan experienced a golden age. That period was followed by civil war. In this reading, you will learn about the rise of a powerful warrior class in Japan- the **samurai**.

Minamoto Yorimoto came to power in Japan in 1185. In 1192, he took the title of shogun, or commander in chief. Yorimoto did not take the place of the emperor. Instead he set up a military government with its own capital in the city of Kamakura. While the imperial court remained in Heian-kyo, emperors played an increasingly less important role in the government of Japan.



The start of the Kamakura government marked the beginning of a new era in Japanese history. Eventually, professional warriors- the samurai- became Japan's ruling class. The era of the samurai lasted for 700 years, until the emperor was restored to power in 1868.

Over time, an elaborate culture and code of conduct grew up around the samurai. A samurai was expected to be honest, brave, and intensely loyal to his lord. In fact, the word *samurai* means "those who serve." The samurai code was very

strict. Samurai sometimes killed themselves with their worn swords rather than "lose face," or personal honor.

The samurai were more than fearless fighters. They were educated in art, writing, and literature. Many were devout Buddhists. Their religious faith helped them prepare for their duties and face death bravely.

In this reading, you will meet Japan's samurai. You will learn about their code of conduct and the role they played in the military society of medieval Japan.

Rise of the Samurai

The military government established by Minamoto Yorimoto was led by a **shogun**, the head of the military government of Japan in the era of the samurai or commander-in-chief. Although emperors continued to rule in name, the real power shifted to the shoguns.

Samurai Under the Shoguns- Shoguns, such as Yorimoto and his successors rewarded warriors, or samurai, with appointments to office and land grants. In return samurai pledged to serve and protect the shogun.

The rise of the samurai brought a new emphasis on military values in Japanese culture. All samurai trained in the arts of war, especially archery. During this period, women, as well as men could be samurai. Girls and boys were trained to harden their feelings and to use weapons. One samurai wrote:

Of what use is it to allow the mind to concentrate on the moon and flowers, compose poems, and learn how to play musical instruments?...Members of my household, including women, must learn to ride wild horses, and shoot powerful bows and arrows.

Shifting Loyalties- By the 14th century, Japan's warrior society resembled the lord-vassal system of medieval Europe. The shogun now ruled with the help of warrior lords called **daimyos**. In turn, the daimyos were supported by large numbers of samurai. The daimyos



expected to be rewarded for their obedience and loyalty with land, money, or administrative office. The samurai expected the same from the daimyos they served.

Over time, the position of the shogun weakened as daimyos became increasingly powerful. Daimyos began to view their lands as independent kingdoms. Samurai now allied themselves with their daimyo lords.

In the late 15th century, Japan fell into chaos. Daimyos warred with one another for land and power. Samurai fought fierce battles on behalf of their lords.

After a century of bloody warfare, a series of skilled generals defeated rival daimyos and reestablished a strong military government. In 1603, the last of these leaders, Tokugawa Ieyasu, became shogun. Tokugawa established a new capital in Edo, present day Tokyo.

For the next 250 years, Japan was at peace. Samurai served under shoguns and administered the government. It was during this time that the samurai ideal came to full flower. Let's look now at the samurai way of life.

The Samurai's Armor and Weapons

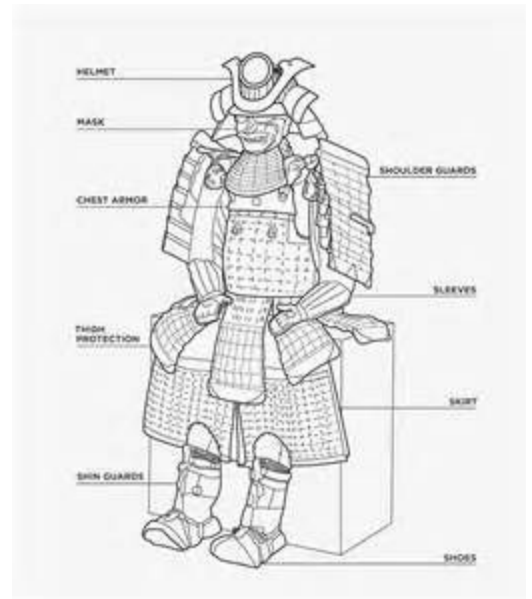
A samurai was first and foremost a warrior. Let's look at what a samurai wore in battle and the weapons he used.

Armor- A samurai went into battle dressed in heavy armor. Under the armor, he wore a colorful robe called a kimono and baggy trousers. Shin guards made of leather or cloth protected his legs.

Samurai armor was unique. It was made of rows of small metal plates coated with lacquer and laced together with colorful silk cords. This type of armor was strong, yet flexible enough for the samurai to move freely.

Boxlike panels of armor created the samurai's chest and back. Metal sleeves covered his arms. Broad shoulder guards and panels that hung over his hips provided extra protection. Some samurai wore thigh guards as well.

After dressing in his body armor, the samurai put on a ferocious looking iron mask that was meant to frighten his opponents as well as protect his face. Last came the helmet. Before putting on the helmet, he burned incense in it. In that way, his head would smell sweet if it were cut off in battle.



Weapons-

Samurai fought with bows and arrows, spears, and swords. A samurai's wooden bow could be up to eight feet long. Such longbows required great strength to use. In battle, samurai on horseback rode toward each other, pulling arrows from the quivers on their backs and firing them at the enemy.

In hand-to-hand combat, some foot soldiers used spears to knock riders off their horses and to kill an enemy on foot with a powerful thrust.

The samurai's most prized weapon, however, was his sword. Japanese sword makers were excellent craftsmen. Samurai swords were the finest in the world. They were flexible enough not to break, but hard enough to be razor sharp. Samurai carried two types of swords. To fight, they used a long sword with a curved blade.

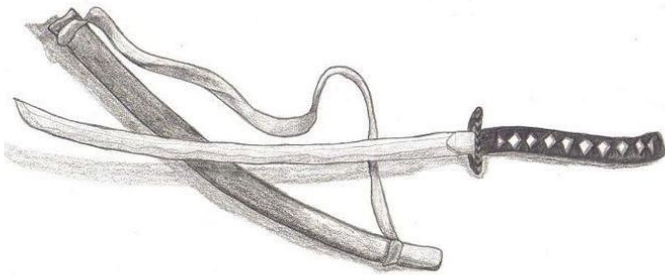
Wearing a sword was the privilege and right of the samurai. Swords were passed down through generations of warrior families and given as prizes to loyal warriors. Even after peace was established in the 17th century, samurai proudly wore their swords as a sign of their rank.

Military Training and Fighting

The way the first samurai warriors trained and fought was called "The Way of the Horse and Bow." Later, the art of swordsmanship became more important than archery.

Military Training- Learning the skills of a samurai required extensive training. Young samurai were apprenticed to archery masters who taught them mental and physical techniques. Samurai practiced until they could shoot accurately without thinking. They also learned to breathe properly and to shoot at their enemies while riding on the back of a galloping horse.

The art of fencing, or swordsmanship, was just as demanding. A samurai had to learn how to force an enemy to make the first move, how to stay out of range of an enemy sword, and how to fight in tight spaces or against more than one opponent. He practiced continuously until he could fence well without thinking about it.



Sometimes in battle a samurai might lose or break his sword. Samurai learned to continue the fight by using other objects as weapons, such as metal fans or wooden staffs. They also learned how to fight without weapons using martial arts. This type of fighting often involved using an opponent's strength against him.

Battle– According to early texts, the samurai had a unique style of battle. First, messengers from opposing sides met to decide the time and place of combat. Then, the two armies faced each other a few hundred yards apart. Samurai on both sides shouted out their names, ancestors, heroic deeds, and reason for fighting. Only then did the armies charge, with mounted samurai firing arrows as they urged their horse forward.

As the two armies clashed, samurai fought each other in hand-to-hand combat. Enemies fought a series of one-on-one duels. Each samurai found an opponent who matched him in rank. He would try to knock his opponent off his horse, wrestle him to the ground, and kill him.



Mental Training

A samurai's education in the art of war included mental training. Samurai had to learn self-control so that they could overcome emotions that might interfere with fighting, especially the fear of death. They also learned to be always alert and prepared to fight.

Training and Self Control– To learn how to endure pain and suffering, young samurai went for days without eating, marched barefoot in snow on long journeys, and held stiff postures for hours without complaining. To overcome the fear of death, they were told to think of themselves as already dead.

Training in Preparedness– A samurai could never relax. An attack could come when least expected even while a samurai was playing music or dancing. For this reason, samurai had to develop a "sixth sense" about danger. This came from long and grueling training.

The experience of one young samurai illustrates this kind of training. The young man's fencing master used to whack him with a wooden sword throughout the day whenever he least expected it. These painful blows eventually taught the young student to always stay alert.

Teachers also told stories about being prepared. One story was about a samurai who was peacefully writing when a swordsman tried to attack him. Using his sixth sense, the samurai felt the attack coming. He flicked ink into the attacker's eyes and escaped. In another story, a samurai woman who was suddenly attacked thrust a piece of paper into her attacker's eyes and gave a war shout. Her attacker ran away.

Women in Samurai Society

The position of women in samurai society declined over time. In the 12th century, the women of the warrior class enjoyed honor and respect. By the 17th century, however, samurai were treated as inferior to their husbands.

Samurai Women in the 12th Century– In the 12th century, samurai women enjoyed considerable status. A samurai's wife helped manage the household and promote the family's interests. When her husband died, she could inherit his property and perform the duties of a vassal. Though women rarely fought, they were expected to be as loyal and brave as men.

Some women, like Tomoe Gozen, did take part in battles alongside men. Fighting one-on-one, she killed several enemies in battle. Then she fenced with the enemy leader, who tried to drag her from her horse. When he tore off her sleeve, she spun her horse around and killed him.

A woman named Koman is another famous warrior. During a battle on a lake, she saved her clan's banner by swimming to shore under a shower of arrows with the banner clenched to her teeth.

Samurai Women in the 17th Century– As the warrior culture developed, women's position weakened. By the 17th century, samurai men were the unquestioned lords of their households. According to one saying, when young, women should obey their fathers; when grown, their husbands; and when old, their sons.

Girls did not choose their own husbands. Instead, families arranged marriages for their daughters to increase their position and wealth. Wives were expected to bear sons, manage the home, and look after their husbands.

A popular book of the time told women how to behave. They were to get up early and go to bed late. During the day they must weave, sew, spin, and take care of their households. They must stick to simple food and clothes and stay away from plays, singing, and other entertainment.

Not all Japanese women were treated the same. Peasant women had some respect and independence because they worked alongside their husbands. But in samurai families, women were completely under men's control.



The Code of Bushido and Samurai Values

The samurai code developed over several centuries. By the 17th century, it took final form in bushido: the way of warrior.

The code of Bushido, like the code of chivalry in medieval Europe, governed a samurai's life. It called on samurai to be honest, fair, and fearless in the face of death. Samurai were expected to value loyalty and personal honor even more than their lives.

THE CODE OF BUSHIDO

Dignity	Leadership	Integrity	Communication	Beauty	Honor
尊敬	信賴	律儀	眞実	美容	名譽



Loyalty and Personal Honor– A samurai's **su reme** duty was to be so loyal to his lord that he would gladly die for him. If his lord was murdered, a samurai might avenge his death. A samurai poem says

Though a time come when mountains crack and seas go dry, never to my lord will I be found double hearted.

Samurai were also expected to guard their personal honor. The least insult on the street could lead to a duel. One samurai, for example, accidentally knocked his umbrella against another samurai umbrella. This quickly turned into a quarrel and then a sword fight, resulting in the first samurai's death.

Ritual Suicide– The price for failing to live up to the code of Bushido was *seppuku*,

or ritual suicide. There were many reasons for seppuku, including preserving personal honor and avoiding capture in battle. Samurai might also perform seppuku to pay for a crime, a shameful deed, or an insult to a person of higher rank. Some samurai even killed themselves when their lord died or as a form of protest against an injustice.

Comparing Japan and Europe in the Middle Ages

The Japan of the samurai period was both like and unlike Europe in the Middle Ages. In both societies, ties of loyalty and obligation bound lords and vassals. Both had rulers who rose in power as military chiefs. But in Europe, a military leader like William the Conqueror ruled as king, the shogun ruled in the name of the emperor.

The daimyos of Japan were like the landholding lords of medieval Europe. Both types of lords built castles and held estates that were worked by peasants.

Both the samurai of Japan and the knights of Europe were warriors who wore armor, rode horse, and owned land. Just as European knights had a code of chivalry, the samurai had the code of bushido. The samurai code, however, was much more strict, since it demanded that a samurai kill himself to maintain his honor.

