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Japan's Samurai Warriors

From the Taiki Reforms to the Meiji Restoration

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 Samurai armies clash at the Battle of Kawanakajima.

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The samurai, a class of highly skilled warriors, gradually developed in Japan after the Taika reforms of A.D. 646, which included land redistribution and heavy new taxes meant to support an elaborate Chinese-style empire. As a result, many small farmers had to sell their land and work as tenant farmers.

Meanwhile, a few large landholders amassed power and wealth, creating a feudal system similar to that of medieval Europe, but unlike Europe, the Japanese feudal lords needed warriors to defend their riches, giving birth to the samurai warrior — or "bushi."

EARLY FEUDAL ERA SAMURAI

Some samurai were relatives of the landowners while others were simply hired swords. The samurai code emphasized loyalty to one's master, even over family loyalty. History shows that the most loyal samurai were usually family members or financial dependents of their lords.

In the 900s, the weak emperors of the Heian Era of 794 to 1185 lost control of rural Japan, and the country was riven by revolt. As a result, the emperor soon wielded power only within the capital,

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and cross the country, the warrior class moved in to fill the power vacuum. After years of fighting and establishing a shogunate rule in many parts of the island nation, the samurai effectively held both military and political power over much of Japan by the early 1100s.

The weak imperial line received a fatal blow to its power in 1156, when Emperor Toba died without a clear successor. His sons, Sutoku and Go-Shirakawa, fought for control in a civil war called the Hogen Rebellion of 1156, but in the end, both would-be emperors lost and the imperial office lost all its remaining power.



During this civil war, the Minamoto and Taira samurai clans rose to prominence and fought one another in the Heiji Rebellion of 1160. After their victory, the Taira established the first samurai-led government and the defeated Minamoto were banished from the capital at Kyoto.


KAMAKURA AND EARLY MUROMACHI (ASHIKAGA) PERIODS

The two clans fought once more in the Genpei War from 1180 to 1185, which ended in victory for the Minamoto.

After that, Minamoto no Yoritomo established the Kamakura Shogunate, with the emperor as a mere figurehead and The Minamoto clan ruled much of Japan until 1333.

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In 1268, an external threat appeared. Kublai Khan, the Mongol ruler of Yuan China, demanded tribute from Japan, but Kyoto refused and the Mongols invaded in 1274 with 600 ships — fortunately, however, a typhoon destroyed their armada, and a second invasion fleet in 1281 met the same fate.

Despite such incredible help from nature, the Mongol attacks cost the Kamakura dearly. Unable to offer land or riches to the samurai leaders who rallied to Japan's defense, the weakened shogun faced a challenge from Emperor Go-Daigo in 1318, exiling the emperor in 1331 who returned and overthrew the Shogunate in 1333.

This Kemmu Restoration of imperial power lasted only three years. In 1336, the Ashikaga Shogunate under Ashikaga Takauji reasserted samurai rule, but it was weaker than the Kamakura had been. Regional constables called "daimyo" developed considerable power, meddling in the shogunate's succession.

LATER MUROMACHI PERIOD AND RESTORATION OF ORDER

By 1460, the daimyos were ignoring orders from the shogun and backing different successors to the imperial throne.

When the shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa,

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resigned in 1464, a dispute between backers of his younger brother and his son ignited even more intense bickering among the daimyo.

In 1467, this squabbling erupted into the decade-long Onin War wherein thousands died and Kyoto was burned to the ground, and directly led to Japan's "Warring States Period," or Sengoku. Between 1467 and 1573, various daimyos led their clans in a fight for national dominance with nearly all of the provinces were engulfed in the fighting.

The Warring States Period began to draw to a close in 1568 when the warlord Oda Nobunaga defeated three other powerful daimyos, marched into Kyoto, and had his favorite, Yoshiaki, installed as shogun. Nobunaga spent the next 14 years subduing other rival daimyos and quelling rebellions by fractious Buddhist monks.

His grand Azuchi Castle, constructed between 1576 and 1579, became of symbol of Japanese reunification.

In 1582, Nobunaga was assassinated by one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide. Hideyoshi, another general, finished the unification and ruled as kampaku, or regent, invading Korea in 1592 and 1597.

THE TOKUGAWA SHOGUNATE OF THE EDO PERIOD

Hideyoshi had exiled the large Tokugawa clan from the area around Kyoto to the Kanto region in eastern Japan. The Taiko died in 1598, and by 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu had conquered the neighboring daimyo from his castle stronghold at Edo, which would one day become Tokyo.

Ieyasu's son, Hidetada, became shogun of the unified country in 1605, ushering in about 250 years of relative peace and stability for Japan. The strong Tokugawa shoguns domesticated the samurai, forcing them to either serve their lords in the cities or give up their swords and farm. This transformed the warriors into a hereditary class of cultured bureaucrats.

MEIJI RESTORATION AND THE END OF THE SAMURAI

In 1868, the Meiji Restoration signaled the beginning of the end for the samurai. The Meiji system of constitutional monarchy included such democratic reforms as term limits for public office and popular balloting. With public support, the Meiji Emperor did away with the samurai, reduced the power of the daimyo, and changed the capital's name from Edo to Tokyo.

The new government created a conscripted army in 1873, and some of the officers were drawn from the ranks of former samurai, but more of them found

work as police officers. In 1877, angry ex-samurai revolted against the Meiji in the Satsuma Rebellion, but they lost the Battle of Shiroyama and the era of the samurai was over.

CULTURE AND WEAPONS OF THE SAMURAI

The culture of the samurai was grounded in the concept of bushido, or the way of the warrior, whose central tenets are honor and freedom from fear of death. A samurai was legally entitled to cut down any commoner who failed to honor him — or her — properly and was considered to be imbued with bushido spirit, fighting fearlessly for his master, and die honorably rather than surrender in defeat.

Out of this disregard for death, the Japanese tradition of seppuku evolved wherein defeated warriors — and disgraced government officials — would commit suicide with honor by ritually disemboweling themselves with a short sword.

Early samurai were archers, fighting on foot or horseback with extremely long bows (yumi) and used swords mainly for finishing off wounded enemies. But after the Mongol invasions of 1272 and 1281, the samurai began to make more use of swords, poles topped by curved blades called naginata, and spears.

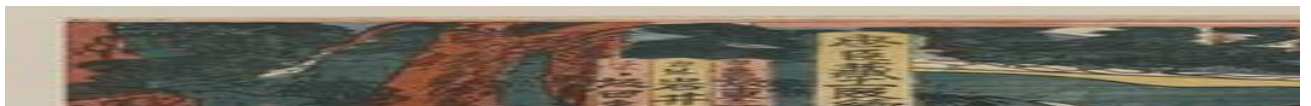
Samurai warriors wore two swords, together called daisho — "long and short" — which consisted of the katana and the wakizashi, which were banned from use by anyone save the samurai in the late 16th century.

HONORING SAMURAI THROUGH MYTH

Modern Japanese honor the memory of the samurai, and bushido still infuses the culture. Today, however, the samurai code is invoked in corporate boardrooms rather than on the battlefield.

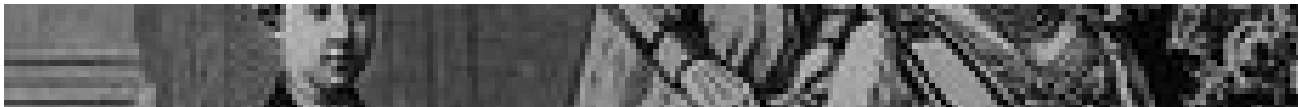
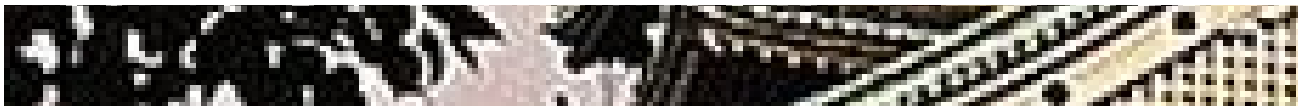
Even now, everyone knows the story of the 47 Ronin, Japan's "national legend." In 1701, the daimyo Asano Naganori drew a dagger in the shogun's palace and tried to kill Kira, a government official. Asano was arrested, and forced to commit seppuku. Two years later, forty-seven of his samurai hunted down Kira and killed him, without knowing Asano's reasons for attacking the official. It was enough that he wanted Kira dead.

Since the ronin had followed bushido, the shogun allowed them to commit seppuku instead of being executed. People still offer incense at the graves of the ronin, and the story has been made into a number of plays and films.





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