

Warfare and History



SAMURAI, WARFARE AND THE
STATE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL JAPAN

Karl F. Friday

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Warfare in early medieval Japan was intimately linked to social structure. Examining the causes and conduct of military operations informs and enhances our understanding of the tenth to fourteenth centuries – the formative age of the samurai.

Karl Friday, an internationally recognized authority on Japanese warriors, provides the first comprehensive study of the topic in English. This work incorporates nearly twenty years of ongoing research, drawing on both new readings of primary sources and the most recent secondary scholarship. It overturns many of the stereotypes that have dominated views of the period.

Friday analyzes Heian-, Kamakura- and Nambokuchō-period warfare from five thematic angles. He examines the principles that justified armed conflict, the mechanisms used to raise and deploy armed forces, the weapons available to early medieval warriors, the means by which they obtained them, and the techniques and customs of battle.

A thorough, accessible and informative review, this study highlights the complex causal relationships among the structures and sources of early medieval political power, technology and the conduct of war.

Karl F. Friday is a professor of Japanese History at the University of Georgia. A specialist in classical and early medieval Japanese history, he has also written widely on samurai culture and Japanese warrior traditions.

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First published 2004
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Friday, Karl F.

Samurai, warfare & the state in early medieval Japan / Karl F. Friday.— 1st ed.

p. cm. — (Warfare and history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Japan—History, Military—To 1868. 2. Samurai—History. I. Title: Samurai, warfare and the state in early medieval Japan. II. Title. III Series

DS838.5.F756 2003
952'.02—dc21 2003011681

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-39216-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-67219-4 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-32962-0 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-32963-9 (pbk)

FOR MY PARENTS, WHO STILL THINK
I'M CRAZY TO DO THIS FOR A LIVING

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some historians are born to certain projects, others have projects thrust upon them. This book falls into the latter category. It began in 1996, with the proverbial offer I could not refuse, in this case an invitation from Jeremy Black to write a volume on early medieval Japan for his “Warfare and History” series. As I took up the task, I was surprised and delighted to discover that I was in pursuit of that rarest of medievalist’s game: a hot topic. In the mid-1990s, an eager pack of young scholars (if, indeed, those of us on the dark side of forty still qualify for that description), as well as a handful of senior historians in Japan, descended with considerable fury on the subject of warfare among the early samurai—an issue that had not attracted attention from serious scholars in decades. Since that time, several dozen excellent books and articles on this topic have appeared, immeasurably enriching my own perspectives on the matter.

This on-going explosion of new scholarship, and the demands of some rather heavy-duty administrative assignments for the history department whose paychecks feed me and my family, has stretched this project out considerably beyond its originally anticipated completion date. I must, therefore, begin my acknowledgements by thanking Prof. Black and the folks at Routledge for their patience and forbearance. Thanks, in particular to Alex Ballantine, Jane Blackwell, Ruth Jeavons, James Cooke and to my copy editor, Caroline Richmond.

Much of the research for this study was funded by a grant from the Japan Foundation, whose support I most gratefully acknowledge. I am also deeply indebted to Profs. Seki Humitake and Ōhama Tetsuya, and the University of Tsukuba; and to Profs. Kondō Shigekazu, Ishigami Eiichi, and the rest of the faculty and staff of the University of Tokyo Shiryōhensanjō for giving me places to work, and for the time they took away from their own labors to assist me with mine.

A special round of thanks goes to Kondō Yoshikazu, Kawai Yasushi, Suzuki Masaya and Tom Conlan, who shared invaluable advice, information, and copies of their numerous publications; to Wayne Farris, for his generous help with some questions concerning economic issues, and for a stimulating e-mail debate about Japanese crossbows that helped me clarify my thoughts on the

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

issue; to Yamamoto Isao for pointing me toward contacts and materials I would not have found otherwise; and to Torkel Brekke for nudging me into deeper investigation of questions concerning the rules of war.

I am also deeply grateful to Cappy Hurst, Andrew Goble, Hitomi Tonomura, Mickey Adolphson, Bruce Batten, Roy Ron, Paul Varley, Ethan Segal, Gordon Berger, Will Bodiford, Thom Whigham and Peter Hoffer, for their support, encouragement – and above all – their friendship throughout this project.

To my deep regret, I did not finish this book in time to include one more name on this list: that of my mentor and friend Jeffrey Mass, whose untimely passing has left an enormous hole, not only in all of our hearts, but in our field as well. I can only hope that Jeff has spent these last two years contentedly arguing *bakufu* politics with Yoritomo.

As always, my most profound debt is to Chie, my wife and my best friend. She not only put up with me before and during this long project, listened patiently to my thoughts and rantings, and offered cogent responses and suggestions, she also drew the artwork for many of the illustrations that adorn this book. I could not have done this without her, and I could not have wanted to.

INTRODUCTION

War is the father of all things.

Heraclitus, sixth century BCE

War is the greatest plague that afflicts mankind; it destroys religion,
it destroys nations, it destroys families.

Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 1569

On the second day of the fifth month of 1213, the weather was cloudy. So, too, was the political future of the thirty-year-old Kamakura shogunate. That afternoon, as the hour of the monkey (3:00–5:00 pm) opened, three or four hundred horsemen and foot soldiers led by Wada Yoshimori and his kinsmen stormed eastward from Yoshimori's home, and through the streets of Kamakura toward the residence of the shogunal regent (*shikken*), Hōjō Yoshitoki.¹

Yoshimori, a warrior from Sagami province, had been one of the first to rally to the cause of Minamoto Yoritomo, when the future Lord of Kamakura raised his war banners in 1180. Appointed head of Yoritomo's Board of Retainers (*samurai-dokoro*) that same year, Yoshimori many times distinguished himself in both battlefield and administrative service to the regime.² By 1213, however, Yoshitoki and his sister, Masako (the widow of Yoritomo, who died in 1199), appear to have identified him as an obstacle to their domination of the shogunate. In the spring of that year, Yoshitoki found the pretext he needed to pick a fight, arresting two of Yoshimori's sons and his nephew Tanenaga on charges of conspiracy against the shogun. Although he subsequently released the sons in deference to Yoshimori, Yoshitoki rejected Yoshimori's pleas on behalf of his nephew. Instead, he paraded Tanenaga, trussed up like a common thief, before Yoshimori and his assembled men. A month later, he compounded this insult by seizing Wada house lands that should, by right and custom, have been entrusted to Yoshimori. Yoshimori spent the next month assembling troops and allies.³

By early afternoon on the second, it must have been obvious to anyone out and about in Kamakura that something unusual was afoot, for horses and men had been assembling in and around Yoshimori's home all morning. The Wada compound stood opposite the Tsurugaoka Hachiman shrine, at the north end of the city, and faced Yoshitoki's home, across the Wakamiya-ōji, the main avenue

running through Kamakura, between the shrine and Yūhigahama beach. A force the size of the one Yoshimori had gathered could scarcely have been contained within the walls of his residential compound, nor could the sounds – or smells – of dozens of horses have been hidden from even the least attentive passers-by. Yoshimori probably attempted to conceal the bulk of his army in the woods, to the northwest of his residence, but he was rapidly losing any possible advantage of surprise. Indeed, Yoshitoki, occupied in a game of *go*, was receiving multiple reports of the goings-on across the street. At length, he quietly slipped out the back gate of his compound, and moved to the shogun's residence, a block and a half to the northeast. In the meantime, the shogun, Sanetomo, and his mother, Hōjō Masako, left their home, to hide in the chambers of the chief administrator (*bettō*) of the shrine.

Yoshimori's plan appears to have centered on capturing or killing Yoshitoki. Toward this end, he split his forces into three groups, sending one to invest the south gate of the shogun's home, and the second to surround Yoshitoki's residence. In the meantime, Yoshimori himself led the third group to attack the home of Yoshitoki's confederate, Ōe Hiromoto. Hiromoto's men were engaged in a drinking party, and were easily taken by the Wada troops pouring through their front gate; but Hiromoto himself had already slipped away, to join Yoshitoki at the shogun's residence. Yoshitoki's home was also quickly overrun, although the men left behind to guard it put up a valiant struggle, claiming numerous casualties from the Wada forces.

Yoshimori and his men then moved on to the Yoko-ōji avenue on the south side of the shogun's residence, where they ran into a group of horsemen hastily deployed by shogunal retainer Hitano Tadatsuna, and reinforced by Miura Yoshimura. Yoshimura, a close kinsman of Yoshimori, had in fact been a confederate to the plotting for the day's attempted coup, but had gotten cold feet at the last minute, and warned Yoshitoki instead. His sudden appearance in the Yoko-ōji must have been Yoshimori's first indication that he had been betrayed. The ensuing *mêlée* filled the streets for several blocks, as mounted warriors dodged around and past one another, shooting, pausing to identify new targets, and charging again. For the next two hours the combat raged on without clear lines or advantage to either side until, at the hour of the cock (5:00–7:00 pm), Wada troops under Asaina Yoshihide broke through the gate and stormed into the south garden of the shogunal compound, shooting down the defenders there and setting fire to the buildings. Yoshitoki and Hiromoto continued the fight “while screaming arrows [*narikabura*] flew and sharp blades flashed.”⁴

Yoshimori's warriors, we are told, “were each man worth a thousand, each fighting like the heavens and the earth and the angry thunder.” None more so, however, than Asaina Yoshihide, who “manifested strength as though he were a god; and none who opposed him escaped death.”⁵ The shogunate's official history of the battle offers four stirring testimonials to his valor and skills.

Among Yoshihide's victims was Yoshimori's nephew Takai Shigemochi, who “had not taken part in his family's plotting, but had come to the shogunal

residence alone to throw down his life.” Which, as it happens, is exactly what he did, almost literally. Yoshihide and Shigemochi rode at one another and, having already emptied their quivers of arrows, “cast away their bows and aligned their bridles, seeking to determine cock from hen.” Drawing their daggers, the pair took hold of one another and grappled. Shigemochi momentarily gained the upper hand, throwing Yoshihide from his mount, only to lose his own balance and topple to the ground with him. The tussle continued for several minutes, until “at length Shigemochi was struck down.” Before Yoshihide could get back onto his horse, however, another warrior, Sagami Tomotoki, came running at him, his long sword in hand. Once again Yoshihide prevailed.⁶

After regaining his mount, Yoshihide rode back through the gate and southwest into the Yoko-ōji, where he spotted Ashikaga Yoshiuji beside a bridge that spanned the ditch surrounding the shogunate’s administrative head-quarters (*mandokoro*). Yoshiuji wheeled and whipped his horse to flee, while Yoshihide galloped forward, catching Yoshiuji by the shoulder plate (*ōsode*) of his armor. In almost the same instant, however, Yoshiuji leaped across the ditch, leaving Yoshihide clutching the shoulder plate, astonished that Yoshiuji’s horse had managed the jump without breaking its legs or throwing its rider. Unable to follow on a mount already fatigued from a battle now entering its third or fourth hour, Yoshihide pulled up, and glared across the ditch at Yoshiuji, while onlookers around them clapped and cheered. A moment later, he turned and galloped around to the bridge, intent on renewing his pursuit. But just as he reached the crossway, a warrior named Taka no Shikan broke from the crowd and rode to support Yoshiuji. Yoshihide quickly killed him but, while the two were thus engaged, Yoshiuji escaped.

By this time it was growing dark, and the Wada men and horses were becoming exhausted. They were also running out of arrows. At length, Yoshimori ordered a withdrawal southward, down the Wakamiya-ōji, to the beach. Hōjō Yasutoki (Yoshitoki’s son) and his men pursued them, clashing at Nakashimōma bridge, and at the Komemachi and Ōmachi intersections along the way. In the meantime, Ōe Hiromoto and his troops pulled back to guard the administrative headquarters and the documents stored there.

The fighting continued sporadically throughout the night. By dawn, Yoshimori and his men were nearly out of provisions, and worn out from more than twelve hours of combat; they were also cold and wet, from the light rain that had been falling since midnight. To make matters worse, they were pinned down on the beach by Hōjō troops, who controlled all the major arteries running northwest into the city. As Yoshimori contemplated his increasingly bleak options, however, his fortunes abruptly changed. At the hour of the tiger (3:00–5:00 am), Yokoyama Tokikane, a warrior from southern Musashi, rode onto the beach from the west, along the old Tōkaidō road, at the head of an enormous contingent of troops under several dozen of his sons, nephews, retainers and allies. Tokikane had, in fact, been part of Yoshimori’s plotting from the start. The two had agreed to open hostilities together on the morning of

the third. Tokikane, arriving according to plan, must have been startled to find himself in the middle of a battle already long underway. As Tokikane's troops shed their straw rain coats, making a pile "said to form a mountain," the allied forces now numbered some 3,000 mounted troops.⁷

Curiously, however, Yoshimori did not move quickly to exploit his now overwhelming advantage in numbers, a miscalculation that proved to be his undoing. While he delayed – perhaps in order to allow his warriors time to rest – troops belonging to the Sōga, Nakamura, Futamiyama and Kawamura houses, "as tumultuous as the clouds and as stirred up as bees," took up positions and erected shields and barricades across the Wakamiya-ōji and other streets leading from the beach. Nevertheless, thoroughly cowed by the size of the enemy forces, the Hōjō allies held in place, in spite of orders to attack. Meanwhile, Yoshitoki and Hiromoto were about to turn things around yet again.

At the hour of the snake (9:00–11:00 am), the pair drafted and countersigned a letter of instruction (*migyōsho*) under the shogun's personal seal, declaring the Wada and Yokoyama to be rebels and enemies of the state – turning what had, to this point, been a private conflict between Yoshimori, Yoshitoki, and their respective allies into a government-sanctioned pursuit of outlaws. They then put the letter to dramatic use, dispatching it by courier to shogunal vassals in neighboring provinces, and simultaneously arranging to have it read before the troops forming ranks on the beach. The effect was spectacular. Yoshimori's and Tokikane's allies deserted them *en masse* for Yoshitoki, and what was now the government army.

Stunned by this sudden reversal of fortune, Yoshimori led his remaining forces in a desperate attempt to cut their way up the Wakamiya-ōji to Yoshitoki, in the shogun's residence. Amazingly, although once again outnumbered, the rebels were still able to advance, scattering many of the shogunate's presumably less than highly motivated allies in their wake. When Hōjō Yasutoki, the government commander on the front, sent a messenger for instructions, a surprised and frightened Sanetomo could only respond with an exhortation to firm up defensive efforts.

At this juncture, fate and superstition intervened on behalf of the Hōjō. As the Wada and Yokoyama warriors galloped through the streets, Ōe Hiromoto composed an appeal for help and dispatched it, along with two poems in his own hand, to the Tsurugaoka Hachiman shrine. At about the same time, one of Yoshimori's key allies, Tsuchiya Yoshikiyo, closing in on the shogunal compound, was suddenly struck and killed by an unidentified arrow. Seeing this, and noting that the arrow had come from the north, the direction of the shrine, the Kamakura men began to shout that the arrow had been a divine one (*kami kabura*), sparking a rally that slowly built to a rout. By the hour of the cock (5:00–7:00 pm), the rebels were in flight. Yoshimori's eldest son, Yoshinao, was shot down by shogunal houseman Iguma Shideshige. A short time later Yoshimori himself, and three of his other sons, fell to Edo Yoshinori. Yoshihide and 500 of his horsemen managed to reach the beach, where they had prepared

escape boats, and put to oars for Awa, while six other Wada commanders and the remaining rebel forces scattered and fled by land. Yoshitoki collected the heads of Yoshimori and the other principals, and put them on display in a temporary hut erected on the beach. Afterward, the victors held a party at Yoshitoki's home that lasted for two days.

According to a report presented three days later, casualties on the Wada side included 142 ranking warriors of the Wada, Yokoyama, Tsuchiya, Yamanouchi, Shibuya, Mōri, Kamakura and Hemmi houses, in addition to a presumably much larger number of "retainers and lesser figures not listed." Another twenty-eight warrior leaders were captured alive. Yoshitoki and his allies had lost only fifty named warriors, while "over a thousand servants of the Minamoto [shogunate] suffered wounds." The shogunate confiscated just over two dozen properties and titles from Yoshimori's allies, redistributing them among Yoshitoki and his men as rewards.⁸

While the skirmishing attendant to the Wada rebellion can hardly be ranked among the celebrated battles of the Kamakura period, it nevertheless exemplified the warfare of the era – in its origins and goals, in the organization of the forces involved, and in the weapons and tactics by which it was fought. Indeed, the flames and smoke and noise and rain and mud and stench and heroics and cruelties and allegiances and betrayals of the second and third days of the fifth month of 1213 reflect the broader face of battle in tenth- to fourteenth-century Japan. So, too, does the warfare of this early medieval epoch reflect the broader face of the age itself. A careful study of early medieval warfare informs and deepens our understanding of the Japanese world, such as it was during the Heian, Kamakura and Nambokuchō periods.

For Heraclitus was wrong. War is not the father of all things, it is the offspring – a quintessential human institution intimately intertwined with two other quintessentially human institutions, society and polity. War can create, define and defend both states and peoples, but it is also created, defined and delimited by them. The purposes for wars and the means by which they are conducted are set forth by the polities and the societies that fight them.

From the mid-tenth century until the late nineteenth, warfare in Japan was the province of professional men-at-arms, known variously as *bushi*, *tsuwamono*, *musha*, *mononofu* or – more popularly among Western audiences – *samurai*. This warrior order came into being, during the early Heian period to serve the imperial court and the noble houses that comprised it – as hired swords and contract bows. Its members ended the Nambokuchō era as the *de facto* masters of the country. Intriguingly, however, the "rise of the *bushi*" was less a matter of dramatic revolution than one incremental evolution, occurring in fits and starts.

Around the turn of the eighth century, the newly restyled imperial house and its supporters secured their position at the apex of Japan's socio-political hierarchy with the promulgation of an elaborate battery of governing institutions modeled in large measure on those of T'ang China. These included numerous provisions for domestic law-enforcement and foreign defense. Contrary to

popular belief, these institutions were not simply adopted wholesale, they were carefully adapted to meet Japanese needs. But the various goals and requirements of the state were often in conflict with one another, with the result that the *ritsuryō* (the statutory, or imperial state) military apparatus incorporated a number of unhappy compromises. Problems inherent in the system at its inception were, moreover, made worse by changing conditions as the principal threats the state armies were designed to meet – invasion from the continent and regional challenges to the new, centralized polity – dwindled rapidly. By the mid-700s, the court had begun to reevaluate its martial needs and to restructure its armed forces, tinkering and experimenting with mechanisms for using and directing a new and different kind of soldiery, until a workable system was achieved around the late tenth century.⁹

The warrior order that would monopolize the application of arms throughout the medieval and early modern eras emerged rapidly during the ninth and tenth centuries, as incentives toward private arms-bearing received new impetus from a variety of directions. First and foremost among these was the dismantling of the *ritsuryō* military apparatus, and the concomitant amplification of the role of elites – members of the upper tiers of provincial society and the lower echelons of the court nobility – in the new military establishment. Bit by bit, the government ceased trying to draft and drill the population at large and concentrated instead on co-opting the privately acquired skills of martially talented elites through a series of new military posts and titles that legitimized the use of the personal martial resources of this group on behalf of the state. In essence, the court moved from a conscripted, publicly trained military force to one composed of privately trained, privately equipped professional mercenaries.

The expansive socio-political changes taking shape in Japan during the Heian period broadened other avenues for parlaying skill at arms into personal success as well. As it happened, government interest in the martial talents of provincial elites and the scions of lower-ranked central noble families dovetailed with growing demands for these same resources spawned by competition for wealth and influence among the premier noble houses of the court. State and personal needs served to create continually expanding opportunities for advancement for those with military talent. Increasingly, from the late eighth century onward, skill at arms offered a means for an ambitious young man to get his foot in the door for a career in government service and/or in the service of some powerful aristocrat in the capital. The greater such opportunities became, the more enthusiastically and the more seriously such young men committed themselves to the profession of arms. The result was the gradual emergence of an order of professional fighting men in the countryside and the capital that came to be known as the *bushi*.

At the heart of these developments lay a phenomenon that is often summarized as the privatization of the workings of government, or, more accurately, as the blurring of lines separating the public and private persona of those who carried out the affairs of governance. While it has become somewhat unfashionable today to employ the concepts of “public” and “private” in discussions of the early

medieval era, these terms do, in fact, appear regularly in sources for the period and are not only useful, but critical to understanding political developments. “Public,” in this context, indicates the notion of a corporate entity – the state – having an existence above and beyond the sum of its parts, as well as to activities overtly sanctioned by the laws and procedural regulations of that entity. “Private” refers, then, to the personal affairs and relationships of the units – the families and individuals – who made up the collective.

During the Heian period, the identity between hereditary status and office-holding, a cardinal feature of the *ritsuryō* polity from its outset, grew increasingly deeper and more rigid. Eligibility for any given post in the bureaucratic hierarchy became progressively more circumscribed, limited to smaller and smaller numbers of houses. Gradually, as the prospect that descendants of particular families would hold the same posts generation after generation turned more and more predictable, many offices – and the tasks assigned them – came to be closely associated with certain houses; and key government functions came to be performed through personal, rather than formal public, channels, rendering “public” and “private” rights and responsibilities harder and harder to distinguish.¹⁰

From the late ninth century onward, court society and the operations of government were increasingly dominated by powerful familial interest groups headed by senior courtiers (*kugyō*), who established complex networks of vertical alliances with low- and middle-ranked nobles.¹¹ Intense political competition at court made control of military resources of one sort or another an invaluable tool for guarding the status, as well as the persons, of the top courtiers and their heirs. Efforts on the part of the great court families to assemble private military forces and to press for control of state military assets were, therefore, ongoing from the inception of the *ritsuryō* state. As the system evolved, *kugyō* vied with one another to recruit men with warrior skills into the ranks of their household service, and to staff the officerships of the military units operating in the capital with their own kinsmen or clients.¹²

Waxing opportunities to parlay skill at arms into advancement through official and semiofficial channels were paralleled and reinforced by profound changes occurring in the fundamental relationship between the court and the countryside. While the provinces were by no means simply left to fend for themselves in matters of law and order, the mechanisms by which they were kept bound to the center evolved considerably between the eighth and eleventh centuries.¹³ In the public sphere, the signal changes revolved around the tax system, which was amended to make tax collection a problem between the central and provincial governments, rather than one between the court and individual subjects. Henceforth, revenue quotas were set province by province, and provincial officials were made accountable for seeing that they were met, as well as for making up shortfalls – out of their own pockets, if necessary. The means by which the taxes were actually collected were left largely to the discretion of the provincial governors and their staffs, who, in turn, delegated most of the

burden to local elites charged with assembling whatever revenues were deemed appropriate from the specific locales in which they had influence. For their part, the local elites welcomed and encouraged such policy measures as opportunities for increasing their personal wealth and power. In the event, the new tax structure proved lucrative to all involved, turning provincial officials and local managers alike into tax farmers, who collected revenues beyond their assigned quotas and pocketed the surplus.¹⁴

Local elites and provincial officials were not, however, the only ones coming to view the agriculturalist residents of the provinces as simple resources for enhancing personal wealth. “Agents of temples, shrines, princes and officials” of the court were also “disobeying provincial governors, ignoring district officials, invading provinces and districts and using their prestige and influence” to pressure residents there, as well as “forcibly impressing men and horses,” “robbing tax shipments,” and “confiscating by force boats, carts, horses and men.”¹⁵

Thus, by the mid-Heian period, the provinces had become a forum for competition for wealth and influence between three groups: provincial resident elites; provincial government officers; and the “temples, shrines, princes and officials” of the court. At the axis of this competition were the middle-ranked court nobles whose careers centered on appointments to provincial government offices. Such career provincial officials (*zuryō*) forged alliances with the lofty aristocrats above them to ensure a continued succession of posts. At the same time, many found that they could use the power and perquisites of their offices, and the strength of their court connections, to establish landed bases in their provinces of appointment and to continue to exploit the resources of these provinces even after their terms of office expired.¹⁶

Against this backdrop, some residents of the provinces were discovering that service to the court was not the only use to which martial skills could be applied. By the ninth century, a significant element was turning to banditry, as either an alternative or an addition to public service. In response, provincial governors, compelled by a need to defend themselves and their prerogatives against outlawry and armed resistance, as well as by the desire to maximize the profits that could be squeezed from taxpayers, began to include “warriors of ability” among the personal entourages that accompanied them to their provinces of appointment. A substantial number of *zuryō* also took up the profession of arms for themselves.¹⁷

Military skills and resources were undoubtedly useful to provincial officials in winning the respect of, or intimidating, armed residents of their provinces. But, far more importantly, they could also enhance an up-and-coming *zuryō*’s prospects at court, by opening doors to the patronage of important aristocrats and to posts in court military units.

By the tenth century, military service at court and service as a provincial official had become parallel and mutually supportive careers for the members of several middle-ranked courtier houses collectively known as the *miyako no musha*, or “warriors of the capital.” The most illustrious of these belonged to

a handful of competing branches of the Seiwa Minamoto – or Genji – and the Kammu Taira – or Heishi.*

Miyako no misha were, to borrow a pet phrase of the late Jeffrey Mass, “bridging figures,” who maintained close economic and personal ties in both the capital and the provinces. Many developed marriage and other alliances with local figures, and held packages of lands scattered about the countryside, which provided them with income. But they resided primarily in the capital, and looked chiefly to the central court for their livelihoods. To provincial governors and their families, Kyoto was the source of the human and physical resources that made their provincial business activities possible, as well as the marketplace for the goods they brought from the country.[†] It was, nevertheless, mainly the central direction of their career emphasis, rather than pedigree or residence as such, that distinguished “warriors of the capital” from “provincial warriors.”¹⁸

The latter were, broadly speaking, men of two main types of ancestry: descendants of cadet branches of central court houses – the Minamoto, the Fujiwara, the Tachibana and the Taira – that had established bases in the provinces; and the scions of families that traced their descent back to pre-*ritsuryō* provincial chieftains. The genealogies of medieval warrior houses suggest a preponderance of the former group. But the reliability of such records is open to some question, and in practice both groups intermarried and interacted so thoroughly as to become functionally indistinguishable.

Heian court marriages were uxorilocal or neolocal, and polygamous or serially monogamous. Children reckoned descent primarily from their father, and took his surname, but they were usually raised in their mother’s home, and inherited much of their material property from her. Often, moreover, when the bride’s family was of significantly higher station than the groom’s, the children – and sometimes the new husband – adopted the surname of the bride’s father. *Zuryō* sent to work in the provinces took their marriage customs with them. Numerous edicts forbidding the practice make it clear that provincial officials took wives

* The term Genji derives from the Sino-Japanese reading of the surname Minamoto. The Seiwa Genji, then, were the Minamoto lines that claimed descent from Emperor Seiwa (r. 858–76). Seiwa had nine sons who bore the surname Minamoto. Of these, the most important military families descended from his sixth son, Sadazumi, through his son Tsunemoto. Similarly, “Heishi” comes from the Sino-Japanese reading of the surname Taira, and the Kammu Heishi were the branches of the Taira descended from Emperor Kammu (r. 781–806). The warrior lines began with Kammu’s eldest son, Katsurahara, through his son and grandson Takami and Takamochi. Takamochi fathered eight sons; the descendants of four established formidable reputations for themselves as military servants of the court for several generations.

[†] Japan’s capital city was known as Heian-kyō during the Heian period; the name “Kyōto” did not come into popular use until the medieval era. In order to minimize confusion, however, I have adopted “Kyoto” as a convenient label for the city throughout its history.

and sons-in-law from provincial elite houses with considerable frequency. As a result, surnames such as Taira, Minamoto and Fujiwara gradually supplanted those of the older provincial noble families among the leading houses of provincial society.¹⁹

Superficial similarities between the samurai and the knights of northern Europe make it tempting to equate the birth of the samurai with the onset of “feudalism” in the Japanese countryside; but such was not the case. Heian Japan remained firmly under civil authority; the socio-economic hierarchy still culminated in a civil, not a military, nobility; and the idea of a warrior order was still more nascent than real. Warrior leaders still looked to the center and to the civil ladder for success, and still saw the profession of arms largely as a means to an end – a foot in the door toward civil rank and office. During the Heian period, warriors thought of themselves as warriors in much the same way that modern corporate CEOs view themselves as shoe makers, automobile manufacturers or magazine distributors: just as the latter tend to identify more closely with CEOs in other industries than with the workers, engineers or middle managers in their factories, design workshops and offices, so too did *bushi* at all levels in the socio-political hierarchy identify more strongly with their non-military social peers than with warriors above or below them in the hierarchy.²⁰

Bushi class-consciousness – a sense of warriors as a separate estate – did not begin to emerge until the thirteenth century, after the Kamakura shogunate was in place. The new institution created the category of shogunal retainer (*gokenin*) as a self-conscious class of individuals with special privileges and responsibilities. It also narrowed the range of social classes from which *bushi* came, by eliminating or supplanting the *miyako no musha* houses in all military affairs outside the capital. Its founder, Minamoto Yoritomo, consciously helped foster this new sense of warrior identity by holding hunts and archery competitions, which were staged in an atmosphere not entirely unlike those of medieval European tournaments.²¹

The sequence of events that led to the birth of Japan’s first warrior government began in 1156, when Yoritomo’s father, Yoshitomo, and his long-time rival Taira Kiyomori found themselves fighting on the same side of a dispute between a reigning and a retired emperor. In the ensuing Hōgen Incident (named for the calendar era in which it occurred), Kiyomori reaped what Yoshitomo considered to have been far more than his fair share of the rewards distributed to the victors. The enmity this precipitated led to the Heiji Incident (again named for the calendar era) of 1159, a poorly conceived and clumsily executed attempt by Yoshitomo to eliminate his rival. This time, several days of bloody fighting left Yoshitomo and most of his supporters dead, and Kiyomori as the premier warrior leader in Japan. For the next two decades, Kiyomori’s prestige and influence at court grew steadily, capped by the marriage of his daughter, Tokuko, to the reigning emperor, Takakura, in 1171, his seizure and confinement of the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa in 1179, and the accession of his grandson to the throne as Emperor Antoku in 1180.

That same year, however, Yoritomo issued a call to arms, parlaying his own pedigree, the localized ambitions of provincial warriors, and the upheavals within the court into a new and innovative base of power. Exiled at thirteen years of age, in the wake of the Heiji Incident – and therefore dispossessed of the career path that would otherwise have been his by right of patrimony – Yoritomo had been effectively locked out of the system, unable to advance his interests through traditional means. His response was to initiate what amounted to an end run around the *status quo* hitherto existing between the central nobility and warriors in the provinces.²²

Seizing on a pretext of rescuing the court from Kiyomori – in answer to a plea broadcast by Prince Mochihito, a frustrated claimant to the throne – Yoritomo announced that he was assuming jurisdiction over all lands and offices in the east, further declaring that, in return for an oath of allegiance to himself, henceforth he (Yoritomo) would assume the role of the court in guaranteeing whatever lands and administrative rights an enlisting vassal considered to be rightfully his own. In essence, Yoritomo was proclaiming the existence of an independent state in the east, a polity run by warriors for warriors. The ensuing groundswell of support touched off a countrywide series of feuds and civil wars subsumed under the rubric of Yoritomo's crusade against Kiyomori and his heirs.

In the course of this so-called Gempei War (the name of which derives from the Sino-Japanese readings for the characters used to write “Minamoto” and “Taira”), however, Yoritomo revealed himself to be a surprisingly conservative revolutionary. Rather than maintain his independent warrior state in the east, Yoritomo instead negotiated a series of accords with the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa that gave permanent status to the Kamakura regime, trading formal court recognition of many of the powers Yoritomo had seized for reincorporation of the east into the court-centered national polity.

Yoritomo's successes at first breaking the east free from court control and then reintegrating it to the imperial fold both raise scholarly eyebrows – for he was hardly the first eastern warrior leader to attempt either feat. The most famous warrior rebellions of the Heian period began in 939, when Taira Masakado seized control of the provincial government offices in Hitachi, and in 1028, when his grandson Taira Tadatsune ravaged the government compound in Awa. Masakado's insurrection climaxed with his claiming for himself the title “New Emperor.” Tadatsune's reach did not extend so far, but his grasp held the provinces of the Bōsō peninsula – Kazusa, Shimōsa and Awa – for the better part of three years, and left much of the region in ruin.

And yet, a careful look at these and similar events during the Heian period demonstrates how strong the underlying ties between the periphery and the center remained, in spite of the loosening of bonds and the expansion of local freedom of action that developed during the epoch. Freedom of local action was not the same as independence, or even autonomy, for the simple reason that the warriors themselves did not yet think in those terms. Even Masakado and Tadatsune, whose insurrections are among the most momentous events of

the period, were not willfully in defiance of central government authority – at least not initially. Their quarrels were local, not national; their insurgency was aimed at specific provincial officials and their subordinates and policies, not the national polity. And when they found themselves branded outlaws and rebels, their first – and most enduring – instincts were to seek reconciliation with the state, through the offices of their patrons at court.²³

Neither Masakado nor Tadatsune – nor any of their epigones – were, however, successful in their efforts. Before Yoritomo, whenever powerful warriors stepped too far out of line and posed a challenge to central authority, the court was always able to find peers and rivals more conservative in their ambitions and assessments of the odds against successful rebellion to subdue them. There was little need, therefore, for the court to bargain with felonious warrior leaders. Yoritomo's theretofore unprecedented achievements were possible because of the sheer scale of the autonomous zone he was able to seize, and because his timing was fortuitous.

When he raised his standard in 1180, he was tapping into a wellspring of intra-familial and inter-class frustration with the structure of land-holding and administrative rights in the provinces. This discontent brought him a vast following. Nevertheless, it by no means earned him a *universal* following – a point that is perhaps more significant to understanding the socio-political dynamics of the period than was Yoritomo's revolution itself. The battle lines in the Gempei War were not really drawn between the “Gen” and the “Hei” (that is, between the Minamoto and the Taira); there were men of Taira kinship on Yoritomo's side and of Minamoto on Kiyomori's. The real conflict was between those, on the one side, who were sufficiently dissatisfied with their lot under the *status quo* to chance an enormous gamble and those, on the other, who were content with their current situation – or simply more conservative in their thinking or more skeptical of Yoritomo's chances for success. The former group signed on with Yoritomo, while the latter fought for the Taira.

The same dynamic that had brought Yoritomo to power, however, necessitated his moves toward reconciliation with the court. As his following mushroomed, he was quick to recognize two key precepts relating to his circumstances and to the nature of authority: first, that the forces he had unleashed were inherently unstable, and could all too easily expand beyond his control; and second, that his only cogent claims to preeminence over other eastern warrior leaders were rooted in his pedigree and his exploitation of Mochihito's warrant against Kiyomori – that is, that his incipient feudal lordship was in fact inextricably bound to the court-centered socio-political structure.

As it happened, the powers-that-were in the court were just as unhappy with Yoritomo's enemies – the Taira, and Minamoto Yoshinaka – as they were with him. In contrast to the circumstances prevailing during previous warrior uprisings, the events of the 1180s left the court with no more palatable choice available to send as champion against Yoritomo, making rapprochement with him the least of several evils.

The resulting Kamakura shogunate was in effect a government within a government, at once a part of and distinct from the imperial court in Kyoto. Dominated after Yoritomo's death by the Hōjō family, who established a permanent regency over a succession of figurehead shoguns, the regime exercised broad administrative powers over the eastern provinces, and held special authority over the warriors, scattered nationwide, whom it recognized as its formal vassals (*gokenin*). After the Jōkyū War of 1221, an ill-fated attempt by a retired emperor, Go-Toba, to eliminate the shogunate, the balance of real power shifted steadily toward Kamakura and away from Kyoto. By the end of that century, the shogunate had assumed control of most of the state's judicial, military and foreign affairs.

In the meantime, *gokenin* across the country discovered that they could manipulate the insulation from direct court supervision Kamakura offered them in order to lay ever stronger and more personal claims to lands – and the people on them – which they ostensibly administered on behalf of the powers-that-were in the capital. Through a ratcheting process of gradual advance by *fait accompli*, a new warrior-dominated system of authority absorbed the older, courtier-dominated one, and real power over the countryside spun off steadily from the center to the hands of local figures.²⁴

By the second quarter of the fourteenth century, this evolution had progressed to the point where the most successful of the shogunate's provincial vassals had begun to question the value of continued submission to Kamakura at all. The regime fell in 1333, as the result of events spawned by an imperial succession dispute.

Both the imperial house and the loyalties of the court had, since the 1260s, been divided between competing lineages descended from Emperor Go-Saga (r. 1242–6): the Senior, or Jimmyōin, line deriving from Go-Saga's eldest son, Go-Fukakasa (r. 1246–59); and the Junior, or Daikakuji, line, descended from his younger brother Kameyama (r. 1259–74). The shogunate, which had taken an active hand in matters of imperial succession since the Jōkyū War, was able to keep this rift under control by arranging a compromise whereby the two lineages would alternate in succession. In 1218, however, Emperor Go-Daigo, of the Junior line, came to the throne, and immediately set about reorganizing the power structure around himself.²⁵

In 1331 Kamakura discovered that Go-Daigo had been plotting its elimination, and responded by forcing his abdication, and later his exile to the remote province of Oki. At this, Emperor Kōgon, of the Senior branch, ascended the throne. In the second month of 1333, however, Go-Daigo escaped from Oki and took refuge with supporters, who had continued to be active in working against the shogunate, under Go-Daigo's son, Prince Moriyoshi. Kamakura responded by dispatching armies under Ashikaga Takauji and Niita Yoshisada to subdue the "loyalist" forces and recapture Go-Daigo. But, in mid-course, both commanders turned on the shogunate, Takauji attacking and destroying its offices in Kyoto, and Yoshisada marching on Kamakura itself. In the sixth month