

THE RISE OF WARRIORS DURING THE WARRING STATES PERIOD

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Ashikaga Tadayoshi. Commonly
attributed to be the shogun
Minamoto Yoritomo.

Japan has been portrayed as having been “governed” by warriors for centuries. George Sansom, writing in 1958, for example, described how warriors gained “control over the whole country” of Japan as a “ruling class”. According to his view, these warriors translated their control over Japanese economic resources and territory into political power, which endured for seven centuries (1185–1868). This sentiment is durable and appears in books published as recently as 2005.

Scholars such as Jeffrey Mass have argued, to the contrary, that this notion of unbroken warrior rule from the 12th century onward is mistaken, in that warriors did not amass considerable fiscal, institutional, and military authority until the 14th century. Mass is correct in that warriors possessed considerable political and military authority in the 14th century. Nevertheless, these warriors clamoured for court ranks and titles, and readily intermarried with courtiers, which suggests that these newly risen warriors remained beholden to the institutions of the court to exercise their newly found hegemony. Analysis of patterns of warrior behaviour and politics reveals that, contrary to common assumptions, warriors governed through the institutions of court until 1551, and did not achieve social or political autonomy from the court until 1615.

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Warriors were drawn from the ranks of provincial officials who served governors, and were responsible for collecting taxes from each of Japan’s provinces. These men, known as *zaichō kanjin*, or provincial office holders, helped these governors to enforce decrees and to collect taxes. These local officials were prosperous, and raised and trained their horses, owned their armour, and trained for war. During a civil war that was known to posterity as the Genpei War (1180–85), a commander named

Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–99) gave his supporters, drawn primarily from the *zaichō kanjin* cohort, the office of *jitō*, or land manager. Some early historians perceived this post of *jitō* as being the lynchpin of a new system of feudalism, whereby a fief, the *jitō* office, was granted to vassals in exchange for their loyal service. The noted Japanese historian Asakawa Kan'ichi considered the *jitō* fief as the cornerstone of feudal Japan, and suggested that this office was granted in exchange for service.

Although Yoritomo rewarded his followers with this *jitō* post, Asakawa's understanding is wrong, because *jitō* posts, once given, would not be confiscated save for instances of legal infractions. To the contrary, the post of *jitō* was hereditarily transmitted, and holders of the post could give it to whomever they saw fit. Instead of being a benefice, the post came to be seen by appointed individuals as an inalienable right. Thus, when Yoritomo's successors punished its *jitō* and confiscated their lands, they earned the enmity of the *jitō*. Rather than serving as the lynchpin for loyal service, the office of *jitō* and their constituent lands became the basis for the identity, and autonomy of these warriors.

Provincial figures, particularly those without the office of *jitō*, favoured the term *gokenin* as a social marker. This means honorable houseman, and became the aspired status for descendants of those who had been known as *zaichō kanjin*. Unlike the clearly defined holders of *jitō* offices, a select group whose holdings were invariably formalised by the possession of documents of investiture or wills from previous *jitō* holders, *gokenin* were determined on an ad hoc basis by protectors [*shugo*], who were responsible for policing the provinces and maintaining order. These protectors created a list of all prominent locals in a province, and those on the list became *gokenin*. With this designation came responsibilities, for those so named had to perform guard duty, or repair dykes, arrest criminals, or otherwise help to keep a province at peace. Not all locals saw the advantages of being on the *gokenin* list, and some turned down the designation, but in the late 13th century *gokenin* were given some more tangible benefits, and the designation became a desirable one. Hence warriors tried to claim that they were *gokenin* even when they were not named on rosters, and thereupon each warrior preserved all investitures, orders, and other edicts so as to “prove” their *gokenin* status.

The *gokenin* was head of the house and exercised authority over all who resided there. The dependent followers of these *gokenin* were generally known as *samurai*, who served their *gokenin* lord. If these figures attempted

to act with autonomy, they would quite possibly be killed by their social superiors for their treachery. Thus, the term *samurai*, which came to describe all warriors after 1590, only referred to a subset of warriors, and dependent ones at that, in the 13th and the 14th centuries.

These *jitō* and *gokenin* warriors have been largely misunderstood by later historians. They fought primarily on horseback. The horses that they rode were small, sturdy, spirited beasts capable of traversing broken terrain. The dominant weapon was the bow, and these warriors referred to themselves as practitioners of the bow. To be able to ride a horse and shoot a bow required training from a very young age; accordingly, members of a warrior house had this ability.

Gender mattered less than being of a *gokenin* house. This meant that *gokenin* men and women were rather equal. Women fought in battle, usually on horseback, and their participation did not merit any censure or stigma. Examples exist of warrior armour tailored to female anatomy, and archaeologists have found skeletons of a man and a woman, both with battle wounds, buried together in 1333. Likewise, women are documented as serving on guard duty.

The Japanese long bows were formidable weapons. They could pierce armour at a short range, and modern practitioners have been able to pierce Teflon pans with these arrows. Although “long distance arrows” could be fired for several hundreds of metres, they could only penetrate armour at tens of metres. But archery was the mainstay of battle, as most fought primarily with projectiles rather than attempting to engage in hand-to-hand combat. Warriors had swords, but they were more weapons of self-protection, rather than a dominant battlefield weapon.

Japanese armour was designed to provide protection for horse riders from bows. The early suits of armour did not protect legs, which were not so vulnerable, but rather had steel reinforcement of the breast plate. For the mounted warrior, sleeves [*sode*] served to protect the upper arms from stray arrows, and thus functioned like portable shields. The face and neck were the most vulnerable areas, as arrows plunging into these regions could be lethal, or severely debilitating. Once warfare became common and long-lasting in the 14th century, warrior armour was improved to better protect the face and neck, thereby revealing its functional nature.

Rather than die for a lord, warriors hoped to gain compensation for their service in battle, and so all damages, and verifiable noteworthy acts, were rigorously inspected. Those that desired the greatest rewards strove

to stand out on the battlefield, and wore red capes or carried flags, with the expectation that they would receive recognition for their outstanding service. *Gokenin* expected their lords to adequately compensate them so that they could protect, and expand, their lands. Obligations did not exist for *gokenin* to serve their lords, but rather for lords to adequately compensate their followers.

Warriors were proficient writers, and *gokenin* men and women could write wills, letters and petitions. Often *gokenin* referred to masters of “the way of the bow and brush”, or *bun* and *bu*; they took this quite literally, with some keeping a brush in their quiver. Perhaps understandably, they exhibited great deference to members of the court, particularly chamberlains [*kurōdo*], who were skilled writers in a cursive style of the most prestigious documents. When confronted with a chamberlain reading an edict, for example, warriors would dismount and listen with respect, and some of these chamberlains parlayed their prestige into military positions, as one, a certain Chigusa Tadaaki (?-1336), commanded an army in 1333.

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The seat of governance of Japan, since the formation of the state in the 6th century, was the court. Japan was ruled by an emperor, who transmitted messages through courtiers. Courtiers were hereditary officials governed on behalf of the emperor. Some resided in the capital of Kyoto while others were appointed governors, who extracted revenue from the provinces. Early warriors were subservient to these governors, and the court in general, although the Genpei Wars are best conceived as a provincial revolt against their arbitrary authority; the creation of the *jitō* posts constrained the authority of these governors.

Nevertheless, even successful warriors, such as Minamoto Yoritomo, could attain relatively junior court offices. Yoritomo’s governing successors, the Hōjō, lacked the rank of even Yoritomo, and did not possess the ability to navigate court circles, or even to have audiences with officials. Instead, they had to rely on a courtier family, the Saionji, to serve as the mouthpiece of the court, but they became liable to manipulation by the Saionji, who, for example, had a rival poet arrested on trumped up charges of treason. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when an emperor and his courtier allies decided to destroy the city of Kamakura, the political centre, they plotted for years before being discovered. When, in 1333 they



The residence of a warrior (*gokenin*),
from a 14th century painting.

launched an attack on Japan's first warrior government, nearly all its *gokenin* abandoned it, leading to its violent extermination by members of the court.

In the aftermath of the destruction of Kamakura, the norms of warrior behaviour became increasingly contested, with some court leaders like Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293–1354) criticising warriors for their demands of compensation. But the Kitabatake, who held warriors to a higher standard, faltered. Ironically, the ideal of devoted loyal service first arose among courtiers and monks, who emphasised their service to the Ashikaga at a time when most warriors were more devoted to preserving their lands. Thus, even fundamental warrior values such as the concept of unflinching devotion, expected of the *gokenin*'s landless followers, achieved new prominence at the 14th-century court, as nobles and monks, more than *gokenin*, became the most trusted supporters of the Ashikaga.

During the time of the short-lived regime (1333–36) of Emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339, and its rival successor, the Ashikaga shogunate (1336–1573), warrior and court society fused. The Ashikaga occupied key positions at court, and their official portraits invariably depict them in court robes. Epitomising their combined warrior and courtier identity, Ashikaga leaders from the late 14th century onward adopted two signatures, one of “warrior” style, and the other of “courtier” style, and it is telling that the latter is far more common than the former in surviving documents. Not content to wear court robes, or sign their documents in the style of courtiers, the Ashikaga and their collaterals intermarried with courtiers, a practice that would remain common for centuries. The Ashikaga governed through the court, and behaved as members of the court, and became successfully socially and institutionally fused with the court as well.

The need to prosecute the wars of the 14th century led to the development of a new tax, called the *hanzei*, or half tax, which allowed half of a province's revenue to be used for military provisions. This caused a devolution of fiscal powers from the court to the provinces, as half of all provincial income remained with generals, who became incipient provincial magnates, or *daimyō*. Over the next two centuries, these lords eroded the autonomy of *gokenin* and subsumed most, if not all *gokenin*, into *daimyō* regional organisation.

New fiscal powers allowed *daimyō* to conscript and provision a standing army. The soldiers in these armies could be trained to use weapons in formation. Soldiers were equipped with pikes, and devised phalanx formations that were capable of defeating cavalry on the open battlefield. This change happened in the 1450s, and the ensuing wars witnessed the preeminence of defensive tactics, much like those used in Europe during the First World War. Units of pike men dug trenches and occupied central Japan during the decade long Ōnin War (1467–77), and two armies fought a savage war of attrition lasting a decade.

These changes in tactics witnessed shifts in armour, as the *sode* or shoulder boards became decorative, or were omitted altogether, while armour was strengthened to protect the legs, face and body. Not all combatants wore such elaborate protection; some pike men relied on simplified armour. Some *daimyō*, such as the Hōjō, started mobilising armies of such a magnitude that they armed their warriors in lacquered paper armour.

The wars of the 15th century resulted in an enervation of Ashikaga authority. This did not mean, however, that the court ceased to be a vehicle for politics. To the contrary, the most powerful *daimyō* continued to rely on court ranks and rituals. After the Ashikaga regime imploded in the early 16th century, the powerful warrior Ōuchi Yoshioki (1477–1528), led a large army to occupy Kyoto from 1508 until 1518. He governed in the name of the Ashikaga, but most critically, exercised authority through court offices. Yoshioki shared authority with Hosokawa Takakuni, and both cooperated. Yoshioki had the rank of Left City Commissioner [*sakyō daibu*] and Takakuni that of Right City Commissioner [*ukyō daibu*]. These two offices were responsible for population registration, security, tax collection and legal appeals in the capital, and this title remained a symbol of governing authority in Kyoto, showing that major *daimyō* continued to govern through the institutions and the offices of the court.

The Ōuchi, the most powerful *daimyō* of western Japan, continued to govern through the institutions and offices of the court, even when, after 1518, they abandoned Kyoto itself. Instead, they attracted nobles and monks to Yamaguchi, their capital, where they performed most important rites of state. Still, the court became increasingly beleaguered because of the rise of a new group of warriors, the Miyoshi, who no longer held the court in esteem.

Miyoshi Nagayoshi (1522–64) was a radical figure. He did not rely on the court, and rather than focusing on protocols of state, he saw violence



as the ultimate ritual. Nagayoshi was descended from a warrior family who gained prominence in an uprising in a district in Awa province in Shikoku, and then became retainers of the Hosokawa. Nagayoshi's great-grandfather Miyoshi Korenaga (?-1520), who raised his family's fortunes, had a reputation for being "strong in battle", but also a "source of great evil".

Nagayoshi proved a worthy heir to Korenaga. On July 21, 1547 Miyoshi Nagayoshi defeated Hosokawa Harumoto (1514–63), his nominal lord, with a formidable force of 900 pike men, inflicting hundreds of casualties in the process. In 1549, Nagayoshi defeated the shogun Ashikaga Yoshiharu (1511–50), and expelled him from the capital. Nagayoshi scorned accepted titles as sources of legitimacy and preferred instead to base his authority upon military prowess.

Nagayoshi's relationship with the court was deeply antagonistic. He seized imperial lands and constricted the flow of revenue to the court, making it difficult for rites to be performed in Kyoto. Reliant on force to achieve his political objectives, he gave primacy to military expediency over other considerations and made no effort to obtain imperial sanction or support. Archaeological evidence reveals that he used an ancient tomb as a castle. These tombs had often been plundered, but their incorporation into a castle's structure appears to have been new. Miyoshi Nagayoshi occupied Kyoto on the eighth day of the third lunar month in 1551, and he was so reviled in some quarters that assassins struck five days later, stabbing him twice at a banquet. He escaped with minor injuries.

This turmoil of early 1551 caused Emperor Go-Nara (1495–1557) to make Ōuchi Yoshitaka (1507–51), a rival of Miyoshi Nagayoshi, the 'provisional governor of Yamashiro'. With this title came the responsibility to protect the court. Yoshitaka took these duties seriously, and attempted to move the emperor to his city of Yamaguchi, in western Japan, where many courtiers of varying ranks already resided. Nevertheless, while immersed in these preparations, some of his followers staged a coup, which led to the destruction of the Ōuchi, and the death of all the prominent warriors and courtiers in Yamaguchi. In short, the plotters killed Yoshitaka and his son, slaughtered the courtiers in Yamaguchi, from the youngest, aged 16, to the oldest, in their sixties, and from the highest rank to the very lowest. From then on, violence lasted for two decades.

The autumn of 1551 represents a rupture. After this time, the court remained only as an impoverished and cowed entity, its courtiers fearful

of its new masters, the Miyoshi. The differing governing styles of Yoshitaka, the greatest upholder of the court, and Miyoshi Nagayoshi, and their divergent fates, marks an important break; after 1551, warriors did not govern through the court, but merely relied on its surviving shell to confer legitimacy.

Miyoshi Nagayoshi never consolidated control before his death in 1564. Epitomising his disdain for the court, he did not pay for the funeral of the emperor, Go-Nara. Go-Nara remained unburied for over seventy days in 1557, his decomposing body highlighting the decline and degradation of the court. Basing his authority on violence, Nagayoshi, his heirs, and his close supporters resorted to increasingly desperate measures to maintain their authority, murdering the shogun Ashikaga Yoshiteru (1536–65) in 1565 and burning Tōdaiji, the largest wooden building in the world, in 1567. Nevertheless, their reliance on military force alone made them vulnerable to the next powerful warlord capable of supplanting them, a figure named Oda Nobunaga (1534–82).

Nobunaga entered the capital in 1568, and displaced the Miyoshi. He did so with the aim of installing an Ashikaga as shogun, but within a few short years, he turned on the last Ashikaga leader, Yoshiaki (1537–97), because Yoshiaki did not adequately take care of the court. Nobunaga proved as willing as the Miyoshi to rely on untrammelled military force and constituted a worthy heir, but he was more conciliatory and received higher ranks and offices from the court, although late in life he resigned from them. Nobunaga also chose not to live in Kyoto, and founded a castle town at Azuchi. Symbolising his authority, Nobunaga famously used a seal which stated *tenka fubu*, meaning “uniting the realm by force”.

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The Miyoshi paroxysm of violence unleashed a new, more distinct warrior identity that was not beholden to the court. This did not mean that warriors would not govern using its institutions. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–98), the successor to Nobunaga, who was assassinated in 1582, achieved high court rank, governing as if he were a regent, or courtier, relying on the institutions and offices of the court. A generous patron of the court, Hideyoshi even served tea to the emperor in a golden teahouse. Hideyoshi received a new surname, Toyotomi, which meant “the bountiful minister” for his generosity.



Miyoshi Nagayoshi (1522–1564).

Nevertheless, Hideyoshi caused an epochal transformation. He forced all landholders to choose to either accept warrior status, adopt two swords, and be guaranteed revenue from their land, or remain an individual with unfettered control over their land, but become a peasant. Those who decided to become warriors had to abandon their lands and concomitant autonomy, for their position became contingent upon the favour of their *daimyō* lord. They became known as *samurai*. Likewise, those with the land, the so-called peasants, were in principle not allowed to have weapons, although many surreptitiously kept them. Swords had a new significance as a marker of social status, and from Hideyoshi's time onward, would be invested with much meaning by these *samurai*. Accordingly, only from the 1590s can one speak of a sword-wielding *samurai* order as existing. Hideyoshi formalised a sense of warrior identity, and a warrior status, but he still governed through the institutions of the court.

The final transformation occurred after Toyotomi Hideyoshi died in 1598. One of his appointed regents, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), instead of upholding Toyotomi rule, undermined it. First, he attacked 'disloyal advisers' to the Toyotomi, and then, after a short, but bloody battle in 1600, he radically redistributed rights of income to strengthen his loyal supporters and undermine Toyotomi partisans. Hideyoshi's heir, Hideyori (1593–1615), continued to have close ties to the court, and high court rank and office. Ieyasu had greater ambitions, but he had to wait until he came up with a suitable pretext. He twice attacked and finally destroyed the Toyotomi regime in 1615.

Ieyasu famously regulated warrior behavior in 1615, but an overlooked, yet arguably more significant edict was issued to the court in that same year. Called the *kuge shohatto*, it limited the ability of courtiers to intermarry with warriors without Tokugawa permission, and stipulated that they were not to engage in politics. The court received funds, but could only engage in cultural activities. Governance was expressed by the shogun, who ruled over a *samurai* order from a massive castle in the new town of Edo (present day Tokyo). The idea that the court was only a realm of culture, rather than politics, became normative, and earlier patterns of governance and society became all but inconceivable.

The violent birth of warrior independence from the court began in 1551, with the actions of Miyoshi Nagayoshi. Thereupon warriors became an independent social order during the time of Hideyoshi, who radically

transformed the political and social matrix of Japan in the late 16th century. The court's role as the vehicle for politics, however, was severed through the Tokugawa regulations of 1615, which would remain in force while the Tokugawa regime maintained power. These laws allowed the Tokugawa to create warrior institutions, ideals, monuments and methods of rule that demarcated 260 years of their hegemony. The idea of their court as the vehicle for governance remained, however. Tellingly, when Tokugawa authority weakened, warriors once again relied on the vehicle of the court, and their ties with courtiers, to bring down the Tokugawa in 1868 and usher in a new era, that made the court, albeit briefly, the centre of governance once again.

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