

Samurai History and Timeline

The Origins of the Samurai

The Samurai was a distinct elite social caste or class that had specific duties, privileges and a strict code of behavior referred to as "bushido", meaning "way of the warrior". The main characteristic of the bushido was complete loyalty towards a lord, the daimyo. Samurai warriors had many privileges in Japanese society. Their most distinguished privilege was their right to carry two swords - a long sword, called "Daito" and a short sword, called "shoto". Unlike the samurai, the Japanese commoners were not allowed to carry any weapons.

Japanese samurai warriors came into existence during 12th century when two powerful Japanese clans fought bitter wars against each other - the Taira and the Minamoto. At that time the Japanese shogunate system was formed. The Shogunate system was commanded by military rulers called shoguns.

The next caste or class beneath the Shogun was the daimyo. The Daimyos were powerful warlords that controlled large estates of land and resources. The Japanese samurai were the loyal military protectors of a daimyo. Japanese had to be born into the Samurai class of society at that time.

According to historians the fierce fights between hostile clans and warlords was mainly a battle for land. Only 20 percent of Japan's rugged and mountainous area can be used for agriculture, making land at that time a priceless commodity.

History Timeline of the Samurai

Heian Period (794-1185)

The samurai's importance and influence grew during the Heian Period, when powerful landowners hired private warriors for the protection of their properties. Towards the end of the Heian Period, two military clans, the Minamoto and Taira, had grown so powerful that they seized control over the country and fought wars for supremacy against one another.

Kamakura Period (1192-1333)

In 1185, the Minamoto defeated the Taira, and Minamoto Yoritomo established a new military government in Kamakura in 1192. As shogun, the highest military officer, he became the ruler of Japan.

Muromachi Period (1333 - 1573)

During the chaotic Era of Warring States (sengoku jidai, 1467-1573), Japan consisted of dozens of independent states

which were constantly fighting each other. Consequently, the demand for samurai was very high. Between the wars, many samurai were working on farms. Many of the famous samurai movies by Kurosawa take place during this era.

Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573 - 1603)

When Toyotomi Hideyoshi reunited Japan, he started to introduce a rigid social caste system which was later completed by Tokugawa Ieyasu and his successors. Hideyoshi forced all samurai to decide between a life on the farm and a warrior life in castle towns. Furthermore, he forbade anyone but the samurai to arm themselves with a sword.

Edo Period (1603 - 1868)

According to the Edo Period's official hierarchy of social castes, the samurai stood at the top, followed by the farmers, artisans and merchants. Furthermore, there were hierarchies within each caste. All samurai were forced to live in castle towns and received income from their lords in form of rice. Masterless samurai were called ronin and caused minor troubles during the early Edo Period.

With the fall of Osaka Castle in 1615, the Tokugawa's last potential rival was eliminated, and relative peace prevailed in Japan for about 250 years. As a result, the importance of martial skills declined, and most samurai became bureaucrats, teachers or artists.

In 1868, Japan's feudal era came to an end, and the samurai class was abolished.