

An Overview of the Samurai

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Given their noble role in most Hollywood movies, you might be surprised to find the discussion of the Samurai is a somewhat controversial area, particularly as to how the Samurai actually acted.

One of the most interesting periods in the past of Japan has to be the feudal period. Out of this era came many different aspects of the Japanese culture that are still thought of today and one of those aspects are the Samurai. Discovering just what role the Samurai actually played is an interesting study into the minds and manners of ancient Japanese warriors.

The story of the Samurai begins with the early shogun warriors, who were trained fighters during the Heian period in Japan. These warriors, amassed by the emperor Kammu in the late eighth to early ninth centuries, were a group of men that were clan warriors from the powerful regional clans in Japan. They were skilled in combat while mounted and as archers. Ironically, the Imperial court did not regard them highly regardless of what you see in movies. In fact, they were seen more as barbarians than as the cultured Samurai now portrayed. As Emperor Kammu's power declined, this group of warriors was disbanded, but soon after new clans of warriors took their place.

In the story of the Samurai, this can be said to be the era when the samurai really developed. Here, in the late Heian period, the warriors began to adopt traditional Japanese styled weapons and armor. They also came up with the foundations of their famous ethical code known as Bushido. At this point, the clan warriors were known as Saburai, or armed retainers, and often accompanied people as needed to protect against thieves and other criminals. After the 1100's, Samurai were expected to not only be excellent fighters, but also to be cultured and educated. They had to follow "Bun Bu Ryo Do", which loosely translated means "the pen and sword in accord".

As Samurai clans evolved beyond just being warriors who were employed by nobility and possibly the emperor, they battled many wars and skirmishes among themselves and against the nobles. By 1200, they established superiority above the aristocracy and were nobility in their own right. The next two hundred years saw the Samurai at the top of their game, with periods where they defeated would-be conquerors such as the Mongols. They also developed the characteristic Samurai sword at this time, the katana, and the very defined Samurai code of ethics.

Alas, the Samurai clans began to be breached by warriors from other classes. This area of Samurai lore is controversial, but it is now generally believed that the Samurai became more of a problem than the threats they were supposed to provide protection against. Many abandoned the code of ethics and reports of mafia like behavior were not uncommon.

By the 1500's, Japan began to open up to the outside world. This led to the importation of firearms, which meant the deterioration of the Samurai culture. By the 19th century it had nearly died out, with just a few people claiming to be descended from the famous warriors. As with many famous groups in antiquity, the Samurai ended with more of a yawn than a bang. They simply could not evolve with the times.

Richard Monk is with FactsMonk.com - a site with facts about everything. Visit us to read more about Japan.

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