

*A Comparison of the Knight
and the Samurai*

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FEUDALISM

Feudalism was a medieval contractual relationship among the European upper classes by which a lord granted land to his men in return for military service. Feudalism was further characterized by the location of political and economic power in the hands of lords and their vassals, and by the exercise of that power from the base of castles, each of which dominated the district in which it was situated. Analogies to European feudalism sought in non-European countries and medieval Japan were commonly described as a feudal society, because of their military service, both *knights* and *samurais* were a central element of feudalism. Among the *knights* and *samurais* there are more similarities than differences and both of them have left feudal legacies in cultural matters, one of which is chivalry from which any modern standards of a gentleman both in Europe and Japan are derived.

The word *knight* in its historical sense usually refers to the heavily armed mounted warrior of medieval Europe, that receives grants of land from powerful lords in return for military service. *Knights* in Europe owed loyalty and service to a feudal superior called a "lord" who in turn were loyal to the "king", and were considered members of the nobility.

The word *samurai* is derived from the Japanese verb *samarau* which means to serve. *Samurais*, like their counterparts the knights, were heavily armed warriors who owed loyalty and service to a feudal superior called a "daimyo", who in turn were loyal to the "shogun". The samurais were considered members of the nobility.

Knights and *samurais* had only one purpose in life, to protect. This protection was primarily to their lord or daimyo, which in turn established a fiduciary relationship with their lord or daimyo to their king or emperor.

This protection was morally backed by a code of honor, in Europe it was known as knighthood and in Japan it was known as Bushido. Both knighthood and bushido stressed bravery, self-discipline and loyalty, but unlike European *knights* the *samurai* had no interest in honoring or defending women.

KNIGHT

In medieval Europe the term *knight* referred to a mounted warrior of secondary noble rank. The name is sometimes also applied to the equities of ancient Rome, a similar class of mounted soldiers who ranked below senators. The Roman class was formed to provide means of advancement for men who were not born into a noble family (or gens). The medieval rank, however, probably originated with the barbarian tribes of northern Europe, and the English term was derived from the old English *cniht* meaning "youth" or "military follower". Often the younger son of a hereditary peer, the *knight* began his training as a young boy by entering the service of an overlord. At the age 15 or 16 he was raised to the rank of squire and began his period of trial. When his overlord considered him worthy, the prospective *knight* received his accolade, traditionally a tap on the shoulder with a sword, which proclaimed him a *knight*. Once knighted he was entitled to the honorific title "Sir" and continued in the military service of his overlord.

As feudalism developed, the rank of *knight* (in French, *chevalier*; in German *ritter*) became a landholding rank. The *knight* held his land by what was known as military tenure. That is, in return for a land grant the *knight* was expected to render military service to his overlord. Knighthood also took on a religious significance and a vigil before the altar became part of the initiation into knighthood.

At the time of the Crusades the great military and religious orders of knighthood were established. They included the *Knights* of St. Lazarus (formed as early as the 4th century but militarized during the 12th century); the *Knights* Hospitalers (formed in the 12th century); the *Knights* Templars (1118); the Teutonic *Knights* (1190); and the *Knights* of the Sword (Livonian Order; 1204). The Spanish orders of Alcantara, Calatrava and Santiago were founded in the 12th century, and the Portuguese Order of Saint Benedict of Avis evolved during the following century.

Later secular knightly orders were established in Europe. They included the Order of Garter (c 1349) in England, the Order of Saint Michael (1469) in France, and the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece (c.1430); later split into Austrian and Spanish branches. As modern weapons and battle techniques diminished the military effectiveness of the armored *knight*, his title became primarily honorary. Increasingly, the military service required of a landholding *knight* was converted to money payments to the overlord-known as scutage in England.

In modern times many monarchies established purely honorific orders of knighthood. In Great Britain they included the Order of the Bath (1725) and the Order of Thistle (for scots; reformed in 1687). The French Legion of Honor was established by Napoleon I.

Honorary knighthood is still in existence. Practices vary from country to country, however. In Britain the title of *knight* is not hereditary but is conferred by the monarch (with the advise of the government). The British feminine equivalent of *knight* is dame commander.

SAMURAI

Japan has a history that dates back thousands of years. Scientists believe the Japanese people descended from many groups that migrated to the islands from other parts of Asia, including China and Korea. As early as 4500 B.C., the Japanese islands were inhabited by fishermen, hunters, and farmers. The early culture was known as "Jomon" which meant "cord pattern". That's because the people made pottery decorated with rope-like designs. Scientists believe a Caucasian race called the "Ainu" were the first inhabitants of what is now Japan. The Ainu still exist today, mostly in the northernmost islands of Japan called Hokkaido. The next major Japanese cultural change occurred about 200 B.C. The people were known as "Yayoi". The Yayoi were mostly farmers. Scientists believe the present day Japanese closely resemble the Yayoi in appearance and language.

War played a central part in the history of Japan. Warring clans controlled much of the country. A chief headed each clan, made up of related families. The chiefs were the ancestors of Japan's imperial family. The wars were usually about "land". Only 20% of the land was fit for farming. The struggle for control of that land eventually gave rise to the *samurai*.

One of the important dates in the history of the Japanese warring class is 660 B.C. That's when according to legend, Jimmu Tenno became head of a confederation of warlike clans. Tenno was known as "The Divine Warrior". He led his people from Kyushu to the Kinki region and conquered the people there. Tenno settled in the area of Yamato. The leaders of Yamato believed themselves to be of divine origin.

The Yamato clans conducted many military campaigns on the Asian mainland. The targets included Korea and China. These campaigns led to the importation of Korean and Chinese culture, technology and martial arts.

Legends says that Emperor Keiko was the first person with the title of "Shogun" The word meant "Barbarian-subduing general," legend continues that Keiko had a son named "Prince Yamato". He was cunning fearless, strong an a great martial artist. Many believe that Yamato was a role model for future Samurai.

Ancient Yayoi warriors developed weapons, armor and a code during the ensuing centuries that became the centerpiece for the Japanese *samurai*. Early weapons included bow, arrows, and swords. Armor included a helmet that protected head and neck, a breastplate that protected the chest, arm and shoulder protectors, and a belly wrap. Later armor included protection for the legs and thighs. Armor changed as the type of battles changed. A big change occurred in the 5th century when horses were introduced to Japan. Another change occurred in the 15th century because of the constancy of war and the introduction of guns into battle. The code developed from the Chinese concept of the virtues of warriors doing battle to the *samurai* code of chivalry known as Kyuba no michi ("The way of horse and Bow") to the Bushido ("Way of the Warrior") code.

"Bushido" means "Way of the Warrior". It was the heart of the believes and conducts of the *samurai*. The philosophy of Bushido is "freedom from fear". It meant that the *samurai* transcended his fear of death. That gave him the peace and power to serve his master faithfully and loyally and die well if necessary. "Duty" is a primary philosophy of the *samurai*.

The *samurai* rose out of the continuing battles for land among the three main clans: the Minamoto, the Fujiwara and the Taira. The Samurai eventually became a class unto themselves between the 9th and the 12th centuries A.D. They were called by two names, *samurai* (knight-retainers) and *bushi* (warriors). Some of them were related to the ruling class. Others were hired men. They gave complete loyalty to their Daimyo (feudal landowner) and received land and position in return. Each Daimyo used his *samurai* to protect his land and to expand his power and his rights to more lands.

The *samurai* became expert in fighting from horseback and on the ground. They practiced armed and unarmed combat. The early *samurai* emphasized fighting with the bow and arrow. They used swords for close in fighting and beheading their enemies. Battles with the Mongols in the late 13th century led to a change in the *samurai* fighting style. They began to use their sword more and also made more use of spears and naginata. The *samurai* slowly changed from fighting on horseback to fighting on foot.

The *samurai* wore two swords (daisho). One was long, the other short. The long sword (daito-Katana was more than 24 inches). The short sword (shoto- wakizashi) was between 12 and 24 inches. The *samurai* often gave names to their swords and believe it was the "soul" of their warriorship. The oldest swords were straight and had their early design in Korea and China. The *samurai's* desire for tougher, sharper swords for battle gave rise to the curved blade we still have today. The sword had its beginning as iron combined with carbon. The swordsmith used fire, water, anvil and hammer to shape the worlds best swords. After forging the blade, the sword polisher did his work to prepare the blade for the "furniture" that surrounded it. Next, the sword tester took the new blade and cut through the bodies of corpses of condemned criminals. They started

by cutting through the small bones of the body and moved up to the large bones. Test results were often recorded on the nakago (the metal piece attaching the sword blade to the handle).

CODE OF HONOR

Both *knights* and *samurais* were guided by strict codes of honor, and in both cases this code of honor guided them throughout their entire life. In the case of the knights the code of honor was called Chivalry, and in the case of the *samurais* it was called Bushido.

CHIVALRY

Chivalry was a system of ethical ideals developed among the *knights* of medieval Europe. Arising out of the feudalism of the period, it combined military virtues with those of Christianity, as epitomized by the Artutian legend in England (Arthur and Arthurian legend) and the Chanson de Geste of medieval France.

The word Chivalry is derived from the French chevalier, meaning "horsemen" or "*knight*". Chivalry was the code of conduct by which knights were supposedly guided. In addition to military prowess and valor and loyalty to God and the knight's feudal lord, it called for courtesy toward enemies and generosity toward the sick and oppressed, widows, and other disadvantaged people.

Also incorporated in the ideal was "courtly love," romantic devotion for a sexually unattainable women, usually another man's wife. Veneration for the Virgin Mary played a part in this concept.

Chivalric ideals influenced the founding of religious military orders during the

period of the Crusades, among them the Templars and the Hospitalers, the Teutonic *Knights*, and the Spanish orders of Alcantara, Calatrava, and Santiago. In the late Middle Ages, rulers formed secular orders of chivalry such as the English order of the Garter (1349) and the Burgundian order of the Golden Fleece (1492). By this time, however, chivalry had become largely a system of etiquette. Tournaments, in which *knights* had originally risked their lives in jousting combat before the ladies, became simply elaborate, stylized, and harmless entertainment. Moreover, the expense of this and other trappings of knighthood led many nobles who were eligible for knighthood (having served the customary apprenticeship of 7 years as a page at a noble court and another 7 as a squire, or attendant, to a *knight*) not to become *knights* at all. From chivalry, always larger in literature than in life, comes the modern concept of the gentleman.

Chivalry and Knighthood were of such epic proportions that the *knights* gave birth to many chivalric romances and fictions. One of the most famous is the picaresque Spanish novel "El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha", by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. The hero of the novel Don Quixote is a lean elderly man who, inflamed by a diet of romantic reading, thinks himself a knight errant and sets out on his emaciated horse Rosinante to fight giants, rescue damsels, uplift the oppressed, and court the approval of his so called lady, Dulcinea del Toboso. Exalting everyone and everything he meets to conform to his chivalric fantasies, he dubs Sancho Panza, the fat peasant who accompanies him on his outdated quest, his squire. The famous pair initially represent the opposition between idealism and realism; as the novel progresses, however, their characters deepen and the two begin to merge. After demonstrating his practicality as governor of an island, Sancho Panza longs for the freedom of the road; whereas Quixote,

tricked by his friends and a scholar disguised as a knight returns home and sadly awakens from his magnificent aberrations.

BUSHIDO

"The way of the warrior", the code of ethics observed by the warrior noblemen, or *samurai* of feudal Japan. Bushido was the natural development of centuries of military experience, integrated by ethical and philosophical influences from the Asian mainland. The original concept of Bushido furnished a moral standard and attained national consciousness in feudal Japan around the twelfth century under Kamakura military rule headed by Yoritomo. As a code of feudal ethics it permitted the bushi to apply their martial skills within the limits of a strictly defined "right" and "wrong".

Bushido was never a written code, being communicated directly from leader to follower. Its early development incorporated Shinto and Confucian ideas such as ancestor respected filial piety. Buddhism, with its concepts of implicit trust in fate, submissiveness to the inevitable, and stoic composure when faced with adversity, was another cultural root. Furthermore, the rise of the rural military aristocracy brought with it a bond of loyalty between leader and subordinate not based on kinship, but rather on mutual benefit and honor.

In the early Tokugawa period the Chinese legal concepts gave way before Japanized ethical concepts built around the *bushi*. The *bushi* were in an ethical straitjacket. Jhon Saris (1605) reports of the period: "That whosoever draws a weapon in anger, although he does not harme therewith, hee is presently cut in peeces: and doing but small hurt, not only themselves are so executed, but their whole generation".

Zen brought to Bushido a method by which the warrior could die well. As noted by the seventeenth century writer of the Primer of Bushido, Daidoji Yusan:

The idea most vital and essential to the bushi is that of death, which he ought to have before his mind day and night, night and day, from the dawn of the first day of the year till the last minute of the last day of it. When this notion takes firm hold of you, you are able to discharge your duties to the fullest extent; you are loyal to your master, filial to your parents, and naturally can avoid all kinds of disasters. Not only is your life itself thereby prolonged, but your personal dignity is enhanced. Think of what a frail thing life is, especially that of a warrior. This being so, you will come to consider every day of your life your last and dedicate it to the fulfillment of your obligation. Never let the thought of a long life seize upon you, for then you are apt to indulge in all kinds of dissipation, and end your days in dire disgrace.

Dying was included within the *bushi* sphere of duty and the regulation of his life. Oswald White wrote: In Japan poets and romantic writers likened the warriors to the cherry blossom. The cherry tree was cultivated not for its fruit, but for its flower, which the Japanese have taken to their hearts as the symbol of purity, of loyalty, and of patriotism. Its beauty is short lived. One moment the tree is decked out in ethereal beauty, the next a wind arises and the petals flutter to the ground. But there is no cause for tears because next year the tree will present the same bravery display. The life of a warrior was like that of a cherry blossom. It was dedicated to his country and when the time came it was laid down without hesitation.

Wisdom to the *bushi* did not mean knowledge of the conceptual type. For the warrior, a literaryman "smells of books" and is compared to an "ill smelling vegetable"

that requires boiling before it is fit for consumption. Thus knowledge for the *bushi* became knowledge only when it was absorbed so as to become part of the person. It was not pursued as an end in itself, but as a means of self-perfection and wisdom. It is this level of knowledge that came to permeate the disciplines of the bugei and bring about their maturation as budo ("martial ways").

Nitobe, in his book *Bushido*, has recorded the essence of bushido in an incomparable manner, citing seven distinctive "virtues".

1. Justice; This precept is referred to as "rectitude" and labels it "the most cogent" in bushido. Dishonesty and deceit did not constitute justice, even if supporting a loyalty—they were unworthy acts.

2. Courage; This was the quality that provoked national admiration. Courage was the tempering influence upon the precept of justice, preventing cowardice from infiltrating that precept. It meant an integration of moral and physical courage, not simply physical bravery or daring. Courage was based on serenity. "Receive arrows in your forehead, but never in your back," goes an old bushi maxim.

3. Benevolence; This precept "the feeling of distress" is a composite of magnanimity, affection, love, pity, and sympathy. Benevolence was seasoned with justice and tempered by right reason so as not to be taken as weakness.

4. Politeness; Although the earlier bushi valued courtesy, it was always related to self-protection. Courtesy disciplined the soul and brought a refined harmony of mind and body.

5. Veracity; What Nitobe also calls truthfulness can be considered a twin brother

of justice. The concept of honesty rose from the Nara period which saw "divine protection based upon honesty"

6. Honor; Honor involved more than a bushi's reputation; it dug deeply into his ancestry. For honor the *bushi* would quickly empty his scabbard. The taking of life was sanctioned if done in defense of honor. He was prone to slay all who offended his honor.

7. Loyalty; Underlying his philosophy of life was the warrior's idea of loyalty to his superiors. Even if his superior fell in defeat, there would be no transferring of allegiance.

There is a well known true story in Japan that admirably demonstrates the combined action of all Nitobe's seven precepts of bushido. In 1700, Asano, the daimyo of Ako in western Honshu, was insulted by a superior named Kira as he stood within the confines of Edo castle. Asano, honor blackened, drew his sword and attacked Kira, but merely succeeded in slashing his face. Because the drawing of swords within the castle's walls was an offense, Asano was forced to performed seppuku (self-immolation commonly known as hara-kiri). Forty six loyal *bushi* of Asano, now masterless, vowed vengeance on Kira, the official responsible for the death of their master. Bakufu surveillance of them, however delayed direct action. To ease governmental suspicions they scattered, many leaving their families and wandering as "ronin" (vagabonds) *samurais* living drinking lives. One day in a tavern one of Asano's *samurai* was acting as a drunk when another *samurai* ashamed of his conduct spit on his face. In 1702, with Kira and the bakufu off guard, the forty six *samurai* entered Kira's mansion during a snow storm on a dark night, killed Kira, and took his head to the graveyard where their master lay

buried and placed their bloody trophy on the tombstone. In accord with the law of the times, they surrendered themselves to the governmental authorities, and commit mass seppuku, they died without demur. This story is called "the forty seven ronin" and there were actually only forty six ronin, the story says that when the *samurai* that spit the face of one of the ronin in the tavern, found out the real reason for the *samurai's* attitude, he went to the cemetery where the ronin's were buried and committed seppuku in front of their tombstone.

ARMS AND ARMOR

By tradition both *knights* and *samurai* considered their armor and weapons almost sacred objects. To keep them in perfect order was an obligation. Neglect the warrior believed, might bring him misfortune in time of combat.

The double edge sword of the *knights* and the katana of the *samurai* are weapons that the majority of the martial arts and war history students are very familiar with, but in the case of the armor, both for *knights* and *samurais* the knowledge seems to not be that strong. Armor in the medieval era was more than a weapon, it was in the hands of the warrior a very formidable weapon, because his very life depended on the use they gave to it. *Knights* and *samurais* were a very small number of soldiers in the battlefield, and in many cases they were mounted, which made them easier to spot. The way they presented combat and the way they fought, depended in many cases of the way they presented the armor to the enemy.

EARLY MEDIEVAL ARMOR

The armor of a *knight* in the 11th century consisted of a thigh length shirt of mail (known as a haubrrk) with elbow length sleeves and a conical helmet with nose guard. In the 12th century the mail shirt gained an attached hood (coif), and the sleeves were full length, terminating in mittens. Mail chausses protected the legs. A mail shirt containing up to 250,000 metal rings might weigh about 11 Kg. (about 25 lb). Mail offers resistance to sword cuts, but it can be penetrated by the point of spears or arrows and is too yielding against heavy blows. A padded undergarment, or aceton, and a shield were, therefore, essential as shock breakers.

In the 11th century it became acceptable battle technique to charge with the lance couched, that is, held under the right arm pit. The left, or shield, side of the knight was always turned to the enemy. The former oval shaped shield was, therefore, modified to an elongated form with a sharp lower point, to protect the horseman from eyes to knee, but this protection locked the fighter in to rigid position. After a face covering visor was developed and added to the helmet, the upper of the shield was shortened. Since the visor made the knight's face unrecognizable, identifying marks had to be placed on his shield, the most convenient surface. This was the origin of heraldry. Crusaders wore a sleeveless surcoat over their mail armor as protection against the hot sun; these surcoats too became emblazoned with heraldic emblems and were known as coat of arms.

Bolts released by the improved crossbows introduced in the first quarter of the 14th century were able to penetrate mail with ease. Armor with deflecting surfaces, therefore, became necessary. This was achieved, about 1350, by the

development of full plate defenses for arms and legs and body armor made of small plates riveted inside the surcoat, known as a coat of plates or brigantine. The loose fitting mail shirt was slipped on over the head, but the coat of plates had to be tight fitting and open in front. The fighting position was with the left shield protected side toward the enemy; to deflect spear points and sword blades therefore, the coat of plates had to be buckled with its left side overlapping the right (for these reason, men's jackets are still buttoned left over right).

In the construction of the armor the weight problem was crucial; armor was supposed to give maximum protection with minimal weight. A full suit of battle armor was not to exceed about 29 kg (about 65 lb); such a suit, well articulated and fitted to the body, was expected to give a *knight* full mobility so that he might mount a horse without stirrups in an emergency. Tournament armor was up to twice as heavy, safety rather than mobility being the prime consideration.

In Japan during the same period of time the armor was made of thin sheets of iron, processed hides, lacquered paper, brass, sharkskin, and cloth. It hung like mail from the body and covered only bare minimum of vulnerable points. Contrary to what might be expected from its appearance, the armor was never designed to withstand the powerful thrust or slash of the blade, serving rather to deflect such forces. The *bushi* trusted his skill and agility to avoid the direct attack of his enemy.

The "kabuto" or helmet was often an immense object; and some important bushi leaders wore helmets whose frontpiece decoration stood

three feet high. The helmet was made of strong iron, lined within its bowl with animal skin, and the whole device was secure to the head by a series of silk chin cords. An awning like piece on the lower edge of the helmet bowl dropped well over the neck and shoulders. The visor came down low over the eyes. Attached to it was a faceplate consisting of a nose and mouthpiece, both of which were removable. A false mustache was sometimes fastened to the upper lip of the mouthpiece to make the warrior more terrifying in appearance. At the center of the helmet a pear shaped ornament joined the pieces making up the bowl construction. This was the weak point of the helmet, causing enemy bladesmen to try to achieve the "pear splitter," a stroke intended to cleave both helmet and occupant in half.

The breastplate of the warrior's armor was made of overlapping plates, bound and laced with iron clamps and cords of silk or hide. It was decorated with a family crest, insignia, and tassels. Large flaps covered the shoulders. Attached to the breastplate, or in some cases worn separated from it, was the similarly made groin protector plating. The shins were protected by wrap around flexible guards, and the feet were covered by sandal-like footwear. Body armor color schemes were impressive and usually selected from black, white, crimson, green, violet, silver, gold, and blue hues, either lacquered or dyed on the materials. Often the choice of color had some connection with family traditions.

As you can see, there are more similarities than dissimilarities between *knights* and *samurais*. Feudalism, had almost the same characteristics in Europe, as in Japan. The concept was the same, a group of fighters, bound to their leader with a code of honor that was bigger than death.

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