

## Samurai and Knights: Were the Similarities Greater Than the Differences?

You live in a country with a weak government and an even weaker army. During your ancestors' time, an emperor ruled and kept the country together. Now, however, the central government has lost power, and dangers lurk beyond every moat and castle wall. Warlords fight each other to see who can control the most territory. Warriors from other lands threaten to invade and destroy your way of life. How can men, women, and children in your region protect themselves?

About one thousand years ago, people in two societies halfway around the world from each other faced this problem. In Europe, the mighty western Roman Empire had fallen in the late 400s, leaving a continent divided among weak kingdoms. A new western European empire arose briefly but it, too, soon fell apart. On the other side of the globe, Japanese emperors and the imperial court was challenged by the rise of **clans**. Like Europe, Japan found itself in pieces.

To keep order in the land, both regions developed a system that historians call **feudalism**. Lords acquired large estates of land. They granted some of their lands to lesser nobles who promised to fight for the lords when conflicts arose. In turn, these nobles trained warriors who, in exchange for farmland or food and lodging, swore to be loyal to the nobles and to defend them. The warriors of Europe were called **knights**. The warriors of Japan were called **samurai**. At the bottom of the feudal system in both Japan and Europe were masses of peasants who farmed the land and provided food for the classes above them.

During the late 1100s in Japan, two large military clans called the Taira and the Minamoto fought to control the country. The Minamoto won the civil war and set up a new government headed by a powerful general called the **shogun**. It is fair to think of the shogun as the top

samurai, the head man of the samurai warrior class. Over the next several hundred years, various shoguns rose and fell. Each ruled the country in the name of the emperor—yet the shogun really held the reins of power.

Europe never developed a position quite like the shogun. Instead, because most of Europe had converted to Christianity, the Catholic Church acted to unify the many kingdoms. The Pope, head of the Church, held power over rulers because he could excommunicate, or ban, them from the Church. On some occasions in England, France, and what is now Germany,

lords gathered together a following of knights and answered the Pope's call to go on crusade against the Muslims in the Holy Land. At other times, conflict was local, pitting lord against lord, or France against England. The important idea is that from roughly 1000 to 1600 CE in Japan and Europe, samurai horsemen and knight horsemen were the muscle



and the soul of the warrior class.

The ideas of soul and honor were very important to both groups. European knights developed a code of behavior called **chivalry**, which blended Christian ideals with military values. In Japan, the samurai warriors developed a code of honor called **bushido**. Bushido blended the Confucian values of obedience and duty with the Buddhist belief that life is temporary and full of suffering. The way to avoid suffering was by giving up selfish desires.

In this Mini-Q, you will learn more about the society, warfare, armor, codes of honor, and beliefs of these two warrior classes. Then you will answer the question before us: *Samurai and knights: Were the similarities greater than the differences?*

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## Background Essay Questions

1. What conditions led to the development of feudalism in both Western Europe and Japan?
2. In the feudal system in both Europe and Japan, what did lesser nobles give to lords in exchange for grants of land?
3. What military figure existed in Japan but not in Europe?
4. What religious figure existed in Europe but not in Japan?
5. What different religions or belief systems influenced people in the two regions?
6. Define each of the following:

clan

feudalism

knight

samurai

shogun

chivalry

bushido

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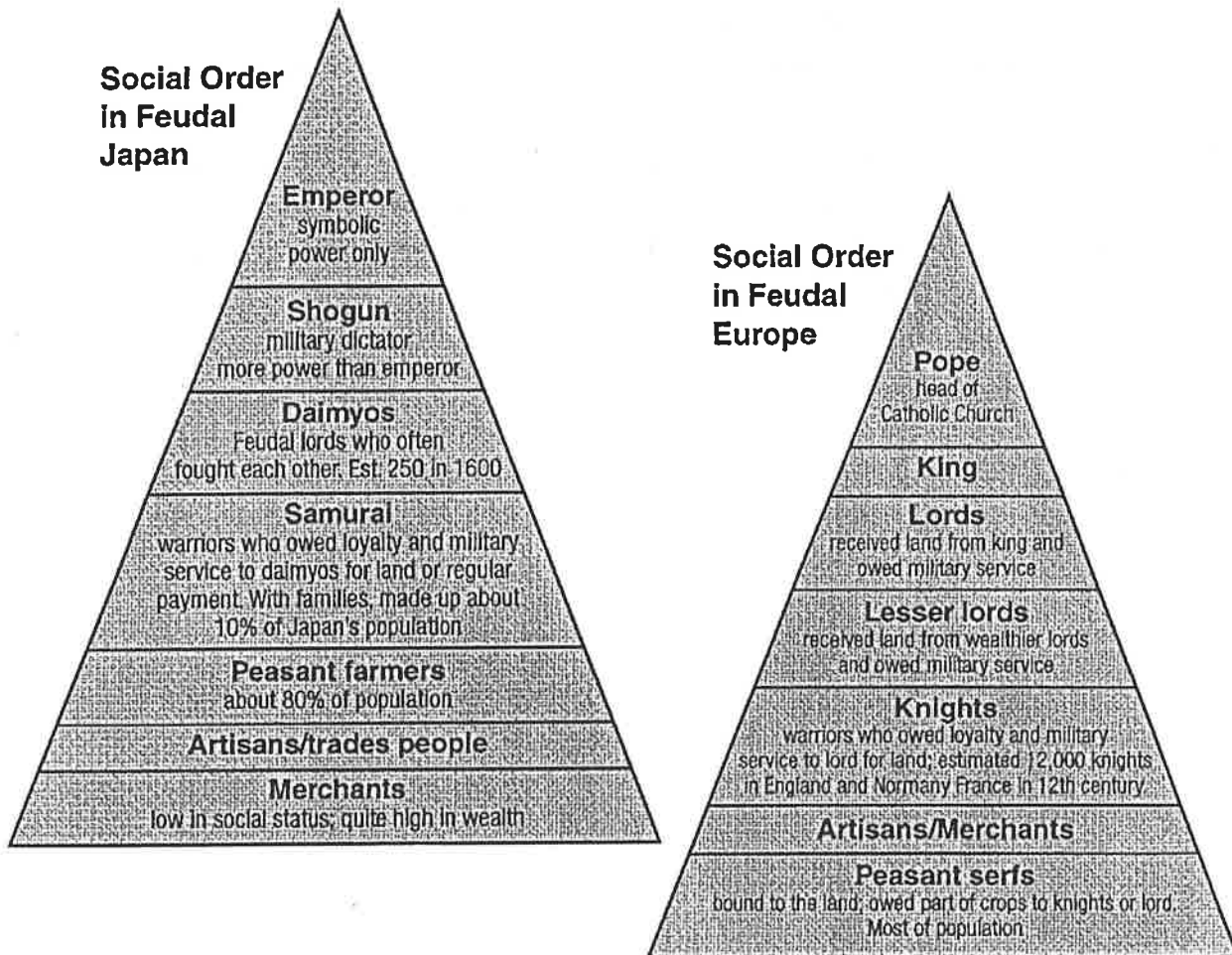
### Timeline

- 1066** – William the Conqueror from France becomes king of England. He establishes feudal system in England.
- 1099** – European knights join First Crusade and capture Jerusalem.
- 1192** – Minamoto Yoritomi becomes the first shogun. Samurai class on the rise.
- 1215** – English barons force King John to sign the Magna Carta, protecting their rights.
- 1274** – Mongols attempt to invade Japan but fail because of a storm.
- 1347** – The plague kills about one-fourth of the European population.
- 1337** – Hundred Years' War fought between France and England begins.
- 1500s** – Guns and bullets bring an end to fighting in armor plate. Knights fade from history.
- 1603** – Tokugawa shogunate begins 260 years of relative order to Japan. Many samurai become bureaucrats.
- 1868** – Samurai class officially ends in Japan.

## Document A

Source: Charts created from various sources.

**Document Note:** Historians and other scholars use social pyramids to show how societies were structured. The people with more status, power, and wealth are at the top of the pyramid. Usually, the less status, power, and wealth a group has, the lower they rank on the pyramid.



## Document Analysis

1. What is the purpose of drawing a social pyramid?
2. What group in Japan was like lords in Europe?
3. In Japan, what was the relationship between samurai and daimyos?
4. In Europe, what was the relationship between knights and lords?
5. Based just on this document, were the similarities between samurai and knights greater than the differences? Provide evidence that supports your answer.

## Document B

Source: Catharina Blomberg, *The Heart of a Warrior: Origins and Religious Background of the Samurai System in Feudal Japan*, Curzon Press.

Loyalty towards the feudal lord in Japan was hereditary.... (S)ervice of a feudal lord went from father to son, so that the relations of lord and (samurai) existed between many families for generations. This arrangement ... was at the same time a voluntary one, in that there was no (legal) binding agreement between the two parties. The European feudal contract, which was a legal document spelling out the obligations of lord and vassal respectively, never existed in Japan.

...(I)t became common to speak of the samurai's allegiance to his lord as lasting the duration of three lives... his past existence, his present one, and the next life.... The life of a samurai was not his own but belonged entirely to his lord, and it was the duty of a (samurai) to consider this at all times.... Not only the life of a samurai was at the disposal of his feudal lord, but also those of his wife and children....

**Note:** To receive a grant of land, an English or French nobleman knelt before his lord and pledged loyalty and military support. In return, the lord swore an oath of protection and granted a fief, or piece of land. This vassal thus became a lord and, if his landholding was big enough, could grant pieces of his new estate to vassal knights for the same oath of loyalty. (It took a fief of about 600 acres to enable a knight to support himself, his horses, his armor, his squire, and his family if he had one.) Unlike Japan, this feudal arrangement was usually not hereditary. The son of a knight was not obligated to become a knight and could discontinue the contract.

### Document Analysis

1. Where was the relationship between lord and warrior hereditary? What does that mean?
2. What evidence is there that the bond between lord and samurai in Japan was strong?
3. About how many acres might be required to support a knight in western Europe?
4. Based on the document, what was an important similarity between samurai and knights?
5. Based on the document, what was an important difference between samurai and knights?

## Document C

Source: Adapted from the PBS series "Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire," 2004.

The rigorous training (of samurai) ... began in childhood ... (S)chool was a unique combination of physical training ... poetry and spiritual discipline. The young warriors studied Kendo (the art of fencing with bamboo sticks), the moral code of the samurai, and Zen Buddhism. (At about age 14 the trainees officially became samurai in a ceremony called *genpuku*.) Samurai were expected to live according to Bushido, a strict ethical code influenced by Confucianism that stressed loyalty to one's master, respect for one's superior, ethical behavior in all aspects of life, and complete self-discipline. Girls also received martial arts training.... [Though samurai women] did not fight on the battlefield, they were prepared to defend their homes against invaders.

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Source: Adapted from the PBS series "Warrior Challenge," 2003.

[A] prospective knight's training [began at age four or five] with learning to ride a pony. By the age of seven or eight, he would be sent to serve as a page to his father's overlord or to a powerful relative. There [he ran errands and practiced] with blunted or wooden swords ... refining his [horse] skills and receiving some religious instruction.... (B)y the age of 14, pages were eligible [to become] a squire. Squires continued with weapons training ... but were already considered to be fighting men. [They would accompany] their master knight into battle, dress him, feed him ... care for his horses and hope ... they would be deemed worthy. If a squire [gained approval from] an examining knight, he would usually [become] a knight at around the age of 21.

Note: A knight's training, especially in 12th-century France, produced knights who were skilled poets. Called *troubadors* because they traveled the country, a number of French knights made their living reciting poetry to an audience.

## Document Analysis

1. What are three examples of the kind of training received by young samurai hopefuls?
2. What are three examples of the kind of training received by pages hoping to become knights?
3. In what ceremony and at what age was a Japanese trainee inducted into the samurai class?
4. At what age did a European page become a squire? When did a squire become a knight?
5. Based on this document, what were the main differences between samurai and knights?
6. Based on the document, what were the main similarities between samurai and knights?

## Document E

Sources: Yamaga Soko, *The Way of the Samurai*, 1600s;  
*Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, circa 1470.

Note: Both Japanese samurai and European knights were expected to abide by a code of honor. In Japan, this code came to be called bushido. In Europe a similar code developed that is generally called the code of chivalry.

### The Code of Bushido

The business of the samurai consists...in discharging loyal service to his master if he has one,\* in deepening his fidelity [loyalty] in associations with friends, and ... in devoting himself to duty above all. However, in one's own life, one becomes unavoidably involved in obligations between father and child, older and younger brother, and husband and wife.... The samurai confines himself to practicing the Way; should there be someone...who transgresses [does wrong] against these moral principles, the samurai summarily punishes him and thus upholds proper moral principles in the land.... (O)utwardly he stands in physical readiness for any call to service and inwardly he strives to fulfill the Way...., Within his heart he keeps to the ways of peace, but without he keeps his weapons ready for use.

\* Not all samurai had masters. Masterless samurai were called ronin and could be a problem.

### The Code of Chivalry

With great ceremony each [knight] took the vows of true knighthood, solemnly promising to do no wicked deed, to be loyal to the King, to give mercy to those asking it, always to be courteous and helpful to ladies, and to fight in no wrongful quarrel for worldly gain, upon pain of death or forfeiture [loss] of knighthood and King Arthur's favour. Unto this were all the knights of the Round Table sworn, both old and young. To dishonour knighthood was the greatest disgrace; to prove themselves worthy of knightly honour by strong, brave, courteous, loyal bearing under great difficulties was the highest end [goal] of living.

### Document Analysis

1. What are the main characteristics of bushido? What are the main characteristics of chivalry?
2. Which code of honor was written first? What is the difference in years between the writing of these codes?
3. What should a samurai do if there is a conflict between dealing with a family problem and one involving the people he serves?
4. Based on the document, what were the main similarities between samurai and knights?
5. Based on the document, what were the main differences between samurai and knights?

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