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Hist 498

Kyuba no Michi

The Samurai are an iconic image of medieval Japan known throughout the world for their skill and warrior spirit. The Samurai warrior class dominated warfare in Japan throughout the medieval period had many names and were “known variously as *bushi*, *tsuwamono*, *musha*, *mononofu* or – more popularly among Western audiences – *samurai*” (Friday pg5). These bushi began to evolve in the Heian period when the Imperial Court began dissolving the standing army and placing more and more responsibility for military and security duties in the hands of lower noble houses. These early bushi had the responsibility to provide and supply their own forces in service to the Imperial Court. In effect the Imperial Court allowed for the creation of private armies that were publicly tied to the Court and at least in theory loyal to it and punishable by it. Across the globe another warrior society existed that dominated the feudal society of Western Europe. The medieval knight was a feudal warrior that swore allegiance to a lord and fought for him based on the feudal ties that existed in Europe. A knight was trained from a young age to be a warrior; he was skilled in the use of many weapons such as the long sword, battle axe, mace, and lance. The knight was heavily armored with plate and chainmail armor and trained in expert horsemanship. Both the samurai and the knight were the preeminent warriors of their time and there have long been comparisons made between the European Medieval Knight and Japan’s warrior class commonly known as the Samurai. But were they as comparable as is claimed? This is what I will address: the martial skill and code, the position in society, the cultural significance, who they fought for, and why the samurai fought and to use the knight to contrast

and emphasize these characteristics. I will also address some misconceptions, at least among westerners, of the samurai and the knight.

Misconceptions

The popular image of the samurai and the knight are both well known but generally hold only a partial truth and in some cases complete falsehoods. The samurai is seen among westerners and many others as being the preeminent swordsman, a nigh unstoppable heavy infantryman that cut down his enemies with his katana- Japanese curved long sword. While it is very true that the samurai was supremely skilled in the use of the katana, there is far more to it than that. In an essay by Karl Friday on the warrior culture of the samurai he makes a significant point in stating what the samurai considered themselves “in Japan early samurai styled themselves followers of *kyuba no michi*, “the way of *bow* and horse.”(Bow pg60). This is very significant for two reasons, first that the bushi themselves considered this to be what they were. The emphasis on the bow signifies that, unlike their western counterparts, they considered the art of the bow to not only be honorable but the main focus of the samurai, the sword was secondary. The second reason that this is important is its implications on warfare for the samurai. They were mounted archers first and as such highly mobile and capable of killing from a distance. This allowed them to move rapidly and to be very flexible, and the side best able to maneuver his samurai would win the day. The sword would only be used as a defensive weapon if the enemy got too close for the bow and when the samurai fought on foot. I will go into more detail on this subject in a later section specifically on how the samurai fought but it is enough to say that the image of the samurai foot soldier wielding the katana is not the whole truth. Another misconception of the samurai is that he was totally loyal and would die before betraying his master or duty. This is in many ways an idealized version of the samurai and did not resemble

the reality of the samurai until the later Edo period. Medieval samurai were not ideologically motivated to be loyal, as Friday points out that “Only warriors without substantial holdings of their own – whose fortunes were therefore inseparable from those of their lords – behaved loyally” (Friday pg60). This is far different than the stereotypical samurai who was completely loyal to master and cause. It shows that samurai were far more practical and motivated by tangible rather than ideological reasons. Now how does this compare to some of the misconceptions of the medieval knight? Well the common image of the knight is one of a heavily armored cavalryman armed with a lance riding down his opponents. It is true that the knight trained and fought heavily on horseback but the knight also spent a significant portion of his time fighting on foot, and the reason for this is simple. Warfare in medieval Europe revolved around the siege and taking of castles, in which a knight could not defend the walls on horseback nor storm them upon a horse. Fighting as a shock infantryman was one of the knight’s dominant roles. Another misconception is that the knight was unable to move or react when inside his armor and that if knocked off his horse he would be unable to get up. This is not true as stated by Dirk H. Breiding:

“The widely held view that a man in armor could hardly move, and, once he had fallen to the ground, was unable to rise again, is also without foundation. On the contrary, historical sources tell us of the famous French knight Jean de Maingre (ca. 1366–1421), known as Maréchal Boucicault, who, in full armor, was able to climb up the underside of a ladder using only his hands. (Breiding, sec 4)”

The reason that knights were capable of such mobility is that even though the total weight of the armor was relatively heavy – 60 lbs – the weight was spread all over the body. By also being composed of many flexible joints with strips of armor, the knight had a wide range of movement

in his plate armor. Now why is all of this important? It is important to discuss the misconceptions of the samurai and knight because only by eliminating preconceptions and approaching the topic with a true understanding of what they each were can they accurately be portrayed. It is significant and interesting that the misconceptions of the knight and samurai are in some ways opposite, the samurai is seen to fight on foot with his sword while the knight is seen to fight on horseback with his lance. In reality the samurai was a mobile mounted warrior that predominately used the bow, and the knight's main role was to defend and take castles and only being able to do so on foot. Now having dispelled some of these common misconceptions I will go into greater detail the martial skill and code of the samurai.

Martial Prowess

The samurai are rightly respected for their fighting skill and the weapons they used to defeat their enemies. One of the most commonly known weapons of the samurai is the katana but it was not the main weapon of the samurai as Friday illustrates "While their Tokugawa – era progeny would revere the sword as "the soul of the samurai," the tools that produced the *bushi* – and defined them throughout the early medieval era – were the horse and the long bow" (Friday pg68). The Japanese longbow that the samurai used was called the *yumi* and it is unique to Japan as no similar type of bow exists elsewhere. The lack of resources in Japan meant that the use of bone or sinew was not a viable option in the construction of bows. The answer in Japan was to put "a single strip of bamboo laminated to the outside face of the wood" (Friday pg69). The bow was also extremely long "some over 2.5 meters" (Friday pg69) to counteract the disadvantages of a bow made only from wood. The bow was long but not shaped the same way as European longbows and instead of having the grip and nock in the center of the

bow, the *yumi* has it 2/3 of the way down the haft. This made it possible for the samurai to fire the bow while riding on horseback notwithstanding its great size. It shows the ingenious capabilities of Japan's craftsmen in their ability to overcome the limits of the islands and to produce an effective bow without the materials that were used in other societies to create bows. It also fitted into the warfare that samurai saw themselves in, that is fighting on horseback and engaging their enemies with their bows in small almost duel style battles and skirmishes. The disadvantage of the *yumi* is that it has a short effective range "usually 10 meters or less" (Friday pg107). Because of this, samurai cavalry tactics involved individuals and groups maneuvering and turning upon one another and closing to fire arrows and then try to either circle back around or to try to get behind the opponent. Other weapons were common at this time and were used mostly by the samurai's retainers that fought with him, usually on foot. One of the most common weapons was the *naginata* "featuring a long (up to 85-100cm) curved blade mounted to an oval haft of about 120 to about 150 cm in length" (Friday pg86). The *naginata* "can be used to sweep, cut or strike, as well as to thrust...It is, in other words, a personal weapon, designed to be used by a warrior fighting largely as an individual" (Friday pg86). Also its length made it effective against mounted samurai and was capable of hooking them and dragging them from their mounts. The *naginata* was one of the main weapons of the samurai when fighting on foot in hand-to-hand combat. It can be seen being used by samurai in the Mongol invasion scrolls (Appendix A). In it infantrymen are seen on both the walls and on boarding ships with the *naginata*, only a few katana are even seen at all. Based on this the *naginata* was the main weapon of melee combat and was only second to the *yumi*. Another weapon that emerged around this time and rose to replace the *naginata* by the 16th century was the *yari* which was a "form of straight, thrusting spear" (Friday pg86). It replaced the *naginata*

as an infantry weapon as larger and more organized samurai armies appeared as it could be used more effectively in confined ranks and was still quite effective against both cavalry and opposing infantry. The weapon that the samurai relied upon for defending himself in close combat and as a last resort was the most famous one of all, the *katana*. As Friday notes “Mystique and symbolic value notwithstanding, however, swords were never a key battlefield armament...They were, rather, supplementary weapons, analogous to the sidearms worn by modern soldiers” (Friday pg78). So, while the *katana* was revered, it was not the main weapon of the samurai and was only used as a back up or in tight quarters where using a bow would mean death. Another important note by Friday is that “there is not a single example, in any document, text or drawing produced before the thirteenth century, that depicts warriors wielding swords from horseback... *bushi* employed swords in street fights, and when unhorsed or otherwise forced to fight on foot” (Friday pg84). This can also be seen in another scene from Suenaga’s Mongol Invasion Scrolls with mounted samurai using their *yumi* not their *katanas* (Appendix B). This is important in understanding how the samurai fought and the mentality that they had. The sword held a near religious cultural importance but on the battlefield it was a backup weapon. Fighting, for the samurai, consisted mainly of mounted and dismounted archery duels and only when fighting in an opponent’s home or in the capital would the samurai resort to their swords. Another factor in how they fought was that the samurai were not only extremely well armed, but also possessed very effective armor. The “*bushi* adopted heavy body armor specifically devised for fighting with bow and arrow from horseback” (Friday pg90). The armor consisted of many interwoven plates, called lamellae, usually made of iron but also of leather rawhide. There were distinct types of armor “*oyoroi*, *haramaki*, *haramaki – yoroi*, *domaru* and *hara – ate*” (Friday pg90). All of these armors were, however, constructed along the same lines using lamellae and interwoven



Figure 1.1

plates. The armor was, because of the plates, flexible and allowed the samurai relative ease of movement for how much protection his armor gave him. The *oyoroi* was mainly used by mounted samurai as it offered the best protection but was also heavy and caused the samurai to tire quickly when fighting on foot. The *haramaki* was used more commonly on foot and a good example of it is seen in a painting from the Sengoku era (figure 1.1). The samurai is seen with a similar cuirass as the *oyoroi* but has smaller shoulder guards and six smaller waist/hip guards

instead of the four larger ones that make up the *oyoroi*. This allowed samurai foot soldiers to still retain excellent protection and flexibility but to also reduce the weight of the armor, making it possible for them to fight longer and to be more mobile. The armor and weapons, or in other words the military technology, set the basic stage for war. The tools of war set the basis and some of the limits of war, as the limitations and capabilities of weapons and armor decide how they can be used. However the science of war also meets with the art of war to create the tactics and mentality of the warriors involved in it. For the samurai war was both a matter of honor and practicality and this shaped the way they fought. Samurai, unlike medieval knights in the west, were not above ambushes or surprise attacks “in fact, the preferred stratagem was to catch opponents off-guard, utilizing ambushes, night attacks and other surprise tactics” (Bow pg66). Since there was no technological advantage or qualitative advantage in soldier skills enjoyed by any samurai clans, one of the main deciding factors in military victories was numbers. The force with the larger numbers had the advantage and one of the ways that samurai sought to take that advantage away was to use deception and surprise to neutralize the advantage in numbers. Also

there was no large scale unit organization in samurai armies till the later periods (Sengoku, Edo) and “Early medieval foot soldiers fought side by side with mounted warriors, in mixed units, rather than in distinct companies of infantry” (Fridaypg105). That is, military organization was based on that of the warrior and the retainers that he brought, and more so that he kept tactical control of them during the fighting. Battles, while having some direction from the lead bushi, were relatively unorganized and rested upon the individual actions of the samurai and their retainers. The reasons that motivated the samurai to fight were partially ideological in that the samurai sought to expand his reputation and his honor, and also practical. Samurai received rewards in the form of confiscated land sometimes but more often the recognition of their current holdings and given positions within the lower governing class. They received the awards for gallantry and skill in combat, so only in fighting at the front and defeating opponents could samurai gain recognition and material rewards. This bears some resemblance to the medieval knight but only when one doesn’t look too closely. The knight fought for material gains, but could take lands through military arms alone and did not need it to be recognized by a higher authority. Also the knight had a far more ingrained sense of honor exemplified in the code of chivalry than the samurai and thus he was more rigidly constrained in how he fought, ambushes and the use of bows was unacceptable and considered un-manly. The samurai and knight were the apex of their society’s war fighters, but the cultural institutions that guided them was significantly different.

Society & Culture

The position of the samurai in Japanese society is one of dominance and at the same time subservience. As the samurai became more and more dominant they wielded more and more real

power. However their legitimacy still came directly from civil authority, the court nobility and the emperor. Only in the period of the warring states could military arms alone translate into material success. In other words, a samurai could fight and kill another and take his land from him by arms, but would not own that land unless it was given to him as a reward by the court and then later the bakufu. Another unique cultural aspect of the samurai that differs significantly from the knight is the lack of a warrior identity and class consciences that existed in Europe. The knight considered himself to belong to a special group within the social structure that was also international. A knight would consider himself to be closer to another knight say from Hungary than his retainers and peasants that he ruled over. This is in many ways opposite among the samurai of Japan “at all levels in the socio-political hierarchy still identified more strongly with their non military social peers, than with warriors above or below them in the hierarchy” (Bow pg80). This is a significant aspect of the samurai culture and the way it interacted with the rest of society. In effect the warrior class of Japan did not consider themselves to be a separate class until late in the medieval period. The class identity of the samurai did not even begin to emerge until after the first shogunate was emplaced and “The new institution, which was in essence a kind of warriors union, created the category of shogunal retainer (*gokenin*), as a self-conscience class of individuals with special privileges and responsibilities” (Bow pg80). It was this act by Yoritomo in his creation of the Kamakura bakufu that began to create an identity of the warrior class as a separate class of society. Warfare was viewed, at least initially, as a means to an end and a “foot in the door toward civil rank and office” (Bow pg80). The warriors that made up the bushi were low level court nobles and nobles from the middle of the provincial nobility. As such they were seen by the rest of the nobility as upstarts and of lower blood. It was a rude shock for the court when Yoritomo set up his bakufu

in eastern Japan and in effect forced the court to have to use him as their military arm. By making himself and more importantly his retainers (*gokenin*) the sole arbiters of military power, he was able to establish an initial idea of warrior identity that would become more and more solid among the bushi until the samurai were a distinct and separate class in Japan's society. However they still did not become the rulers of Japan as the knights were in Europe, where all knights were not lords and kings but all lords and kings were knights. This was not the case in medieval Japan, while the influence and actual power of the court nobility waxed and waned, the ruling authority was a civil authority not a military one. Even under the Shoguns, the emperor and the court played a role in the power struggles and served as a legitimizing force. Thus the civil nobility still were considered to be of greater esteem than the samurai who controlled the real power in Japan. It is remarkable not that the civil aristocracy fell from power, but that they were able to retain their legitimacy and in some cases authority for so long. By contrast, medieval Europe saw little to no civil nobility and only the military elite held any power and more importantly legitimacy. Knights did not have to look to a civil noble to back their deeds, what the knight won in combat was his by his own right. What can be said is that the Japanese society was more fractured and complicated than the hierarchy found in medieval Europe. The main turning point in Japanese society is when the samurai began to take an active role in politics themselves. When they started to use their skills as warriors and, instead of following the orders of the court, to change the status quo in order benefit themselves. Their affect on society was to turn the established order on itself and to use their skills to carve their own areas of influence and to impose their will upon other groups in society. When compared to the knight it is hard find similarities beyond the fact that they used military force to achieve their goals, the knight ruled medieval society, the samurai took part in it.

Conclusion

Despite all the misconceptions and characterizations it is hard to come away with a feeling that, beyond the surface, the knight and the samurai were similar or equivalent. The samurai and the knight were both the preeminent warriors of their societies, but the key differences can be seen when one looks at how they fought and the positions they held. For the samurai pragmatism was the key motivator when it came to deciding how and why they fought. This is one of the main reasons that the samurai had no code restricting the use of bows, as in the case of the knight, or in the use of surprise attacks or deception. Kyuba no michi was first and foremost a vocational description, one that did not have the moral obligations that the code of chivalry had with medieval knights. While honor played a significant role for the samurai it was also grounded in pragmatism. A samurai's honor revolved around his reputation, but most importantly his military reputation. As Friday notes "Slights to reputation or honor were often catalysts to bloodshed. Warriors might refuse orders from their superiors, risk loss of valuable retainers, and even murder men to whom they owed their lives, all for the sake of their reputations" (Bow pg65). The honor of a warrior was his most important possession and it was obtained on the battlefield. Only through acts of gallantry could the samurai receive rewards for his bravery from his superiors. In the end the samurai were excellently armed & armored, had excellent training and fought any way they could to achieve victory. Still they looked to the center for legitimacy and this is the most significance from the west, that a civil authority, not military, gave ultimate legitimacy to their military actions. Even when the reality was that the bakufu ruled the country de facto, the Emperor was the source of power and through his nominal approval was power and support gained.

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Appendix

A: Boarding ships

B: Cavalry Charge with *yumi*