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He established himself as military leader of Japan, distributing land to allies in return for their military support. The emperor recognized him as "shogun" (military protector) and in effect shoguns began to have the true power in Japan. As in Western Europe, Japanese feudalism involved the exchange of land for military service and loyalty. In both cases, peasants worked the land to provide food for the community. Society was class based, with roles passed down from parent to child. There was no one united central government was in place. Shoguns were military leaders that controlled local areas of power. A feudal lord was called a "daimyo" and commanded an army of samurai or professional warriors. Samurai did not have land like knights of Europe. Samurai had a strict code of conduct (bushido). Sometimes, ritual suicide (seppuku) was deemed necessary. Meanwhile, ninjas were mercenaries, specializing in espionage and assassination. Tokugawa Ieyasu was named military leader (shogun) by the Japanese emperor in 1603 and established his government in Tokyo (then known as Edo). This led to an extended period of control by Tokugawa shoguns ("Tokugawa era"), which is often labeled the "Edo Period" for the location of their capital city. The traditional religion of Japan was Shinto, but Confucianism grew in importance, stressing not only morality but the importance of hierarchical order in government and society. There were periods when leaders of Japan closed the island nation from the rest of the world, including banning international travel and banning foreign literature. This parochialism started to be pulled back in the 18th Century including with the introduction of new teachings from China and Europe. Westernization, adapting to the ways of Europe and the United States, began to be popular. This was particularly so when the industrial and military might of such nations was observed. In the 1850s, Commodore Matthew Perry (United States) sailed to Japan and used signs of such military power to start "opening" Japan to more trade with other nations (Kanagawa Treaty). Japan believed they negotiated such treaties with the United States, Great Britain and Russia under duress, forcing them to agree to what was seen as "unequal" treaties with unfair requirements. This caused national unrest and along with other problems led to the end of the Tokugawa era and the start of modern Japan.The shogun system was ended, and the imperial system was restored, now under Emperor Meiji. This "Meiji Restoration" led to a big push to bring in Western ways, culturally (such as hairstyles), governmentally (new Western-style constitution) and industrially (building of railroads, and telegraph lines). It also led to a build-up of the military, which showed its might in various signs of Japanese imperialist clashes with China, Korea, and Russia. Japan sided with Britain (Allies) in World War I, but their imperialistic aims and shift to a more militaristic nationalistic style would lead to a different strategic alliance in the years to come. IF YOU WANT A WORD PUZZLE THAT ALIGNS WITH THIS PASSAGE CLICK HERE.Happy teaching! link to Constitutional Lessons: State Powers and Responsibilities link to The 19th Century Internet: How the Telegraph United the World Support us on Patreon Feudal Japan is a period of Japanese history that spans approximately from the 12th century to the end of the 19th century, when the country was under the control of a feudal system. This time was characterized by constant warfare between clans, the development of the samurai class, and the formation of a unique cultural identity that influenced modern Japanese society. Origin of the Feudal System The feudal system in Japan began to form in the late 12th century when political power started to shift from the central government to local lords: Heian Period – during this period, the power of the emperor weakened, and feudal lords (daimyō) began to accumulate wealth and land holdings. Rise of the Samurai Class – the need for land protection led to the emergence of samurai, who became an important military class. Establishment of the Shogunate – in 1192, the first shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo, established the first shogunate (bakufu), which began to govern Japan through the system of daimyō. Structure of Feudal Society The feudal system in Japan was a complex hierarchy that included various social classes: Emperor – formally was the head of state, but real power belonged to the shogun. Shogun – the highest military ruler who controlled the country through daimyō. Daimyō – feudal lords who governed large territories and had their own armies of samurai. Samurai – the warrior class that served the daimyō and ensured protection and order in their domains. Peasants – the main workforce that cultivated the land and paid taxes, sustaining the feudal system. Workers and Artisans – engaged in the production of goods and services but held low status in society. Economy of Feudal Japan The economy of feudal Japan was based on agricultural production: Agriculture – peasants grew rice, which was the main product and served as the basis for taxes. Trade – despite the feudal system, trade gradually developed, especially in large cities like Kyoto and Osaka. Cottage Industries – artisans produced goods such as weapons, textiles, and ceramics, which were important for samurai and feudal lords. Political System The political system of feudal Japan was based on feudal relationships: Vassalage System – samurai became vassals of the daimyō, swearing allegiance and receiving land allocations in exchange for service. Local Governance – daimyō governed their lands, establishing their own laws and rules. Conflicts and Wars – constant conflicts between daimyō led to wars known as Sengoku, which lasted from the 15th to the 16th century. Culture of Feudal Japan Feudal Japan was a time of cultural flourishing, forming a unique Japanese identity: Literature – during this time, Japanese literature developed, including poetry such as haiku and tanka. Art – painting, calligraphy, and theater, such as kabuki, became important elements of culture. Buddhism and Shintoism – religious practices played a significant role in people's lives, which was also reflected in art and philosophy. Sengoku Period The Sengoku Period (1467-1568) was a time of war and chaos in Japan: Civil Wars – principalities fought for power, leading to continuous clashes between clans. Emergence of New Leaders – amid the chaos, influential military leaders such as Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu began to emerge. Strategy and Tactics – the development of new military tactics and the use of firearms changed the course of battles. Establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu established the third shogunate (bakufu), which brought a long period of peace to Japan: Edo Period – from 1603 to 1868, Japan experienced a period of stability known as Edo. Centralization of Power – the shogunate strengthened central power, leading to a decrease in the influence of local daimyō. Culture and Economy – during the Edo period, culture, art, and trade flourished, making Japan more open to the outside world. Decline of the Feudal System By the end of the 19th century, the feudal system in Japan came to its logical conclusion: Western Influence – as a result of external pressure, Japan began to open up to the West, changing its economic and political structure. Meiji Restoration – in 1868, the restoration of imperial power occurred, which ended the feudal system. Modernization – the new government began implementing reforms aimed at modernizing the country and creating a modern state. Legacy of Feudal Japan Feudal Japan left a significant legacy that is still felt in modern society: Culture and Traditions – many cultural practices and traditions that originated in the feudal era continue to be preserved today. Martial Arts – the art of the samurai and their martial traditions continue to evolve today. Japanese Identity – the feudal era laid the foundation for the formation of a unique Japanese identity that remains today. Conclusion Feudal Japan represents a key period in the history of the country, during which the main social, economic, and cultural structures were formed that continue to influence modern Japanese society. Studying this period helps to better understand the development of Japan and its place in the world. Share: Facebook Twitter LinkedIn WhatsApp Telegram Reddit Viber email Other articles: Support us on Patreon Subscribe to topic Subscribe to author Print Article PDF Feudalism in medieval Japan (1185-1603) is the relationship between lords and vassals where land ownership and its use were exchanged for military service and loyalty. Although present earlier to some degree, the feudal system in Japan was really established from the beginning of the Kamakura Period in the late 12th century. The Japanese shoguns or military dictators replaced the emperor and imperial court as the country's main source of government. The shogunates then distributed land to loyal followers and these estates (shoen) were then supervised by officials such as the jito (stewards) and shugo (constables). Unlike in European feudalism, these often hereditary officials, at least initially, did not own land themselves. However, over time, the jito and shugo, operating far from the central government, gained more and more powers with many of them becoming large landowners (daimyo) in their own right and, with their own private armies, they challenged the authority of the shogunate governments. Feudalism as a nation-wide system thus broke down, even if the lord-vassal relationship did continue after the medieval period in the form of samurai offering their services to estate owners. Origins & Structure Feudalism (hoken seido), that is the arrangement between lords and vassals where the former gave favour or on (e.g. land, titles, or prestigious offices) in exchange for military service (giri) from the latter, began to be widespread in Japan from the beginning of the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). The main instigator was Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-1199) who had established himself as the military dictator or shogun of Japan in 1192. Replacing the dominance of the Japanese Emperor and the imperial court, the new system saw Yoritomo distribute land (which was often confiscated from defeated rivals) to his loyal followers and allies in return for their military service and continued support. Yoritomo was particularly adept at enticing members of the rival Taira clan to his, the Minamoto cause by offering them land and positions if they agreed to be his vassals in the new order. The system allowed the shogun to have direct control of most of his territory, but the lack of formal institutions of government would be a lasting weakness. Unlike in Europe, the feudal system of Japan was less contractually based and a much more personal affair between lords and vassals with a strong paternalistic influence coming from the former, who were often referred to as oya or 'parent.' This 'family' feel was further strengthened by the fact that many lord-vassal relationships were inherited. The system allowed the shogun to have direct control of most of his territory, but the lack of formal institutions of government would be a lasting weakness of the shogunates as personal loyalties were rarely passed on to successive generations. Jito Some of the loyal followers of the shogun received many estates (shoen), which were often geographically disparate or distant from their traditional family homes, and so, rather than manage them directly themselves, they employed the services of an appointed steward (jito) for that purpose. Jito (and shugo - see below) was not a new position but had been used on a smaller scale in the Heian Period (794-1185) and, appointed by the shogunate government, they became a useful tool for managing land, taxes and produce far from the capital. Here, too, is another difference with European feudalism as stewards never (officially) owned land themselves, that is until the wheels started to come off the feudal system. Jito literally means 'head of the land', and the position was open to men and women in the early medieval period. Their principal responsibility was to manage the peasants who worked their employer's land and collect the relevant local taxes. The steward was entitled to fees (about 10% of the land's produce) and tenure but was often bound by local customs and also held accountable to such national law codes as the Goseibai Shikimoku (1232). In addition, aggrieved landowners and vassals could, from 1184, turn to the Monchujo (Board of Inquiry) which looked after all legal matters including lawsuits, appeals, and disputes over land rights and loans. In 1249 a High Court, the Hikitsukeshu, was formed which was especially concerned with any disputes related to land and taxes. Minamoto no Yoritomo Painted Wall-hanging Many jito eventually became powerful in their own right, and their descendants became daimyo or influential feudal landowners from the 14th century onwards. These daimyo ruled with a large degree of autonomy, even if they did have to follow certain rules laid down by the government such as where to build a castle. Shugo Another layer of estate managers was the shugo or military governor or constable who had policing and administrative responsibilities in their particular province. In the 14th century, there were 57 such provinces and so a shugo was involved in several estates at once, unlike the jito who only had one to worry about one. A shugo, literally meaning 'protector', made decisions according to local customs and military laws and, like the jito, they collected regular taxes in kind for the shogunate government, a portion of which they were entitled to keep for themselves. They were also charged with collecting special taxes (tansen) for one-off events like coronations and temple-building projects and organising labour for state projects like building roads and guesthouses along the routes. Other responsibilities included capturing pirates, punishing traitors, and calling up warriors for use by the state - not only in wartime but also as part of the regular rotation system where provinces supplied guards for the capital Heiankyo (Kyoto). By the 14th century CE, the shugo had also assumed the responsibilities of those jito who had not become daimyo. Over time the position of shugo became, in effect, one of a regional governor. The shugo became ever more powerful, with taxes being directed into their own pockets and such rights as collecting the tansen often being given to subordinates as a way to create an alternative lord-vassal relationship without any land exchange being involved. The giving out of titles and organising private arrangements with samurai also allowed the shugo to build up their own personal armies. Following the failed Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, shugo were legally obliged to reside in the province which they administered for greater state security, but whether this was always carried out in practice is unclear. By the 14th century, the shugo had also assumed the responsibilities of those jito who had not become daimyo, and by the 15th century CE, most shugo inherited the position. Weaknesses of the Feudal System One of the problems for the jito and shugo was that their authority out in the provinces, far from the central government, often relied on the goodwill of the locals, and when the shogunate government was weak - as it often was - samurai warriors and ambitious landowners often ignored demands for taxes or even took matters into their own hands and overturned the established arrangements of lord and vassal to increase their own power and wealth. An additional weakness in the system was that jito and shugo depended entirely on local sources for their income, not the central government and this meant that they often made entirely self-interested arrangements. Thus, the shogunate itself became a largely irrelevant and invisible institution at a local level. Farmers often made private deals with officials, giving, for example, a small parcel of land in exchange for a delay in payment of taxes or a negotiated percentage in order to pay their expected fees annually. As a consequence, the whole setup of land ownership in Japan became very complex indeed with multiple possible landowners for any stretch of land: private individuals (vassal and non-vassals), government officials, religious institutions, the shogunate, and the Crown. Yet another problem was that when jito inherited from their fathers there was often not enough money to make a living if the rights of income had to be distributed amongst several siblings. This situation led to many jito getting into debt as they mortgaged their right of income from a given estate. There were additional weaknesses to the feudal system as time wore on, too, namely the difficulty in finding new land and titles to award vassals in an era of stable government. In the Sengoku Period or Warring States Period (1467-1568) Japan suffered from constant civil wars between the rival daimyo warlords with their own private armies who knew they could ignore the shugo and other officials of the government which was now impotent to enforce its will in the provinces. Land was also ending up in fewer and fewer hands as the daimyo with most military might swallowed up their smaller rivals. By the Edo Period (1603-1868) there would be a mere 250 daimyo across the whole of Japan. The phenomenon of new rulers overthrowing the established order and of branch families taking the estates of the traditional major clans became known as gekokujo or 'those below overthrowing those above.' The consequence of this social and administrative upheaval was that Japan was no longer a unified state but had become a patchwork of feudal estates centred around individual castles and fortified mansions as loyalties became highly localised. Villages and small towns, largely abandoned by the government, were obliged to form their own councils (so) and leagues of mutual assistance (ikki). Not until Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), who defeated his rival warlords in the central part of the archipelago in the 1560s, did Japan begin to look like a unified country again. Map of Japan in the 16th Century CE With the arrival of the much stronger Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868) the daimyo were finally put in their place and severe restrictions imposed on them. These included a ban on moving their troops outside of their area and not being able to make political alliances in their own name, build more than one castle, or marry without the shogun's approval. The feudal system did, nevertheless, continue in the guise of samurai swearing loyalty to their particular daimyo up to the Meiji Period (1868-1912), even if there was now a prolonged period of relative peace and military service was less needed than in medieval times. From the 17th century, then, the Japanese feudal system was, instead of being a nation-wide pyramid structure of land distribution, largely one of local samurai warriors offering their services to a large estate owner or warlord in exchange for use of land, rice, or cash. It is for this reason that the bushido or samurai warrior code was developed which aimed to ensure samurai remained disciplined and loyal to their employers. Meanwhile, increasing urbanisation as people moved from rural life into the cities with their greater employment opportunities, and the ever-rising number of those involved in trade and commerce meant that the old feudal system was applicable to fewer and fewer people as Japan moved into the modern era. This content was made possible with generous support from the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation. Did you like this article? This human-authored article has been reviewed by our editorial team before publication to ensure accuracy, reliability and adherence to academic standards in accordance with our editorial policy. Beasley, W.G. The Japanese Experience. University of California Press, 2000. Deal, W.E. Handbook To Life In Medieval And Early Modern Japan. Facts on File, 2005. Ebrey, P.B. Pre-Modern East Asia. Cengage Learning, 2013. Henshall, K. Historical Dictionary of Japan to 1945. Scarecrow Press, 2013. Huffman, J.L. Japan in World History. Oxford University Press, 2010. Mason, R.H.P. A History of Japan. Tuttle Publishing, 1997. Sansom, G. A History of Japan to 1334. Stanford University Press, 1958. Yamamura, K. (ed). The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 3. Cambridge University Press, 2001. World History Encyclopedia is an Amazon Associate and earns a commission on qualifying book purchases. Feudalism developed in medieval Japan when the shoguns or military dictators replaced the emperor and imperial court as the country's main source of government. The shogunates then distributed land to loyal followers. As some followers had land in different areas, they allowed an estate to be managed for them by a steward. The role of feudalism in Japan was to distribute power and land locally, allowing the central government to control land far away from the capital. Many lord-vassal relationships were inherited which meant that there were strong ties of loyalty. Japan's feudal structure was based on a shogun giving his followers land to manage and gain revenue from. These followers often left the management of their land to a steward, the jito. Sometimes a jito became very powerful and was known as a daimyo. Another key position was the shugo who had policing and administrative responsibilities in regional provinces. World History Encyclopedia is a non-profit organization. Please support free history education for millions of learners worldwide for only $5 per month by becoming a member. Thank you! World History Encyclopedia is a non-profit organization. Please support free history education for millions of learners worldwide for only $5 per month by becoming a member. Thank you! Become a Member Donate Add External Link Submitted by Mark Cartwright, published on 26 August 2019. The copyright holder has published this content under the following license: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike. This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon this content non-commercially, as long as they credit the author and license their new creations under the identical terms. When republishing on the web a hyperlink back to the original content source URL must be included. Please note that content linked from this page may have different licensing terms. Most people today associated the word 'samurai' with being a warrior. Initially, this was true. However, as the influence and power of these warriors increased, they developed into their own social group. Therefore, 'samurai' became a level of society that you were born into, not a career that you chose. As a result, women and children were born into the samurai class, even if they never became warriors. However, the most important people in this social group were the trained samurai soldiers. Only about 10% of Japanese society were samurai, but due to their military dominance, they were very influential. As a result, other members of society were meant to treat the samurai with a great deal of respect. If you encountered a samurai in the street, you had to bow towards them politely. If a person from the lowest of the social classes failed to do this, the samurai were legally allowed to kill them. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Geography & Travel Countries of the World Minamoto YoritomoMinamoto Yoritomo, color on silk cloth attributed to Fujiwara Takanobu; in the collection of Jingo Temple, Kyōto.The establishment of the bakufu by Minamoto Yoritomo at the end of the 12th century can be regarded as the beginning of a new era, one in which independent government by the warrior class successfully opposed the political authority of the civil aristocracy. Modern scholarly interpretation, however, has retreated from recognizing a major break and the establishment of feudal institutions with the founding of the Kamakura regime. During the Kamakura period, total warrior dominance was not achieved. There was, instead, what approached a dyarchy with civil power in Kyōto and military power in Kamakura sharing authority for governing the nation. Institutions of the Heian imperial-aristocratic system remained in place throughout the Kamakura age, replaced with new feudal institutions when Kamakura passed from the scene. During the Gempei War, Yoritomo established his headquarters in Kamakura and entrusted the suppression of the Taira to his younger brothers Noriyori and Yoshitsune. Meanwhile, he gathered a following of great eastern warrior leaders and began to lay the foundation for a new military government. In 1180, for example, Yoritomo set up the Samurai-dokoro (Board of Retainers), a disciplinary board to control his multiplying military vassals. General administration was handled by a secretariat, which was opened four years later and known as the Kumonjo (later renamed the Mandokoro). In addition, a judicial board, the Monchūjo, was set up to handle lawsuits and appeals. These institutions represent the emergence of Yoritomo's regime (the term bakufu was used only later in retrospect). In 1185, after the destruction of the Taira family at the Battle of Dannoura, Yoritomo was granted the right to appoint his vassals, or gokenin ("housemen") as military governors (shugo) in the provinces and military stewards (jitō) in both public and private landed estates. It was the job of the shugo to recruit metropolitan guards and keep strict control over subversives and criminals. The jitō collected taxes, supervised the management of landed estates, and maintained public order. Although the Gempei War ended in 1185, a dispute between Yoritomo and his brother Yoshitsune resulted in continued warfare until 1189, when Yoritomo finally destroyed the northern Fujiwara family of Mutsu province (modern Aomori prefecture), which had sheltered his rebellious brother. Three years later Yoritomo went to Kyōto and was appointed shogun (an abbreviation of seii taishōgun; "barbarian-quelling generalissimo"), the highest honor that could be accorded a warrior. Though he kept the title only briefly and was not known by that term in the documents he issued to manage Kamakura affairs, "shogun" ultimately emerged as the title associated with the head of a bakufu. At first the chief base of the Kamakura bakufu lay in the shōen seized from the Taira family and in the limited administrative revenues from public estates in provinces granted to Yoritomo by the imperial court. But later the bakufu was able to expand its influence over lands that were still controlled by the civil provincial governors, as well as the private estates of the civil aristocracy and the temples and shrines. After the death of Yoritomo in 1199, real power in the bakufu passed into the hands of the Hōjō family, from which Yoritomo's wife, Masako, had come. In 1203 Hōjō Tokimasa, Masako's father, assumed the position of regent (shikken) for the shogun, an office that was held until 1333 by nine successive members of the Hōjō family. Taking advantage of disputes among Yoritomo's generals, the Hōjō overthrew and outmaneuvered their rivals, and after three generations the direct line of descent from Yoritomo had become extinct. Though wielding actual power, the Hōjō family was of low social rank, and its leaders could not aspire to become shoguns themselves. Kujō Yoritsune, a Fujiwara scion and distant relative of Yoritomo, was appointed shogun, while Tokimasa's son Hōjō Yoshitoki (shikken 1205–24) handled most government business. Thereafter, the appointment and dismissal of the shogun followed the wishes of the Hōjō family. Shoguns were selected only from the Fujiwara or imperial houses, out of concern for pedigree. The increasing political power of the military led to a conflict with the aristocracy. Hence, the emperor Go-Toba, seeing in the demise of the Minamoto family a good opportunity to restore his political power, in 1221 issued a mandate to the country for the overthrow of Yoshitoki. Few warriors, however, responded to his call. Instead, the Hōjō family dispatched a bakufu army that occupied Kyōto, and Go-Toba was arrested and banished to the island of Oki. This incident is known as the Jōkyū Disturbance, named for the era name Jōkyū (1219–22). The bakufu now set up a headquarters in Kyōto to supervise the court and to control the legal and administrative business of the western provinces. The several thousand estates of the civil aristocrats and warriors who had joined Go-Toba were confiscated, and Kamakura vassals were appointed to jitō posts in them as rewards. The political power of the bakufu now extended over the whole country. Meanwhile, the regent Hōjō Yasutoki, to strengthen the base of his political power, reorganized the council of leading retainers into a Council of State (Hyōjō-shū). In 1232 the council drew up a legal code known as the Jōei Formulary (Jōei Shikimoku). Its 51 articles set down in writing for the first time the legal precedents of the bakufu. Its purpose was simpler than that of the ritsuryō, the old legal and political system of the Nara and Heian civil aristocracy. In essence, it was a body of pragmatic law laid down for the proper conduct of the warriors in administering justice. In 1249 the regent Hōjō Tokiyori also set up a judicial court, the Hikitsuke-shū, to secure greater impartiality and promptness in legal decisions. The establishment of the regency government coincided with the rise of the Mongols under Genghis Khan in Central Asia. Beginning in 1206, in the space of barely half a century, they had established an empire extending from the Korean peninsula in the east to as far west as Russia and Poland. In 1260 Genghis Khan's successor, Kublai, became Great Khan in China and fixed his capital at present-day Peking (Beijing). In 1271 Kublai adopted the dynastic title of Yüan, and shortly thereafter the Mongols began preparations for an invasion of Japan. In the autumn of 1274 a Mongol and Korean army of some 40,000 men set out from present-day South Korea. On landing in Kyushu it occupied a portion of Hizen province (part of present-day Saga prefecture) and advanced to Chikuzen. The bakufu appointed Shōni Sukeyoshi as military commander, and the Kyushu military vassals were mobilized for defense. A Mongol army landed in Hakata Bay, forcing the Japanese defenders to retreat to Dazaifu; but a typhoon suddenly arose, destroying more than 200 ships of the invaders, and the survivors returned to southern Korea. The bakufu took measures to better prepare for a renewed invasion. Coastal defenses were strengthened, and a stone wall was constructed extending for several miles around Hakata Bay to thwart the powerful Mongol cavalry. Apportioned among the Kyushu vassals, these public works took five years to complete and required considerable expenditure. Meanwhile, the Mongols made plans for a second expedition. In 1281 two separate armies were arrayed: an eastern army consisting of about 40,000 Mongol, northern Chinese, and Korean troops set out from South Korea, and a second army of about 100,000 troops from southern China under the command of the Mongol general Hung Ch'a-ch'iu. The two armies met at Hirado and in a combined assault breached the defenses at Hakata Bay. But again a fierce typhoon destroyed nearly all of the invading fleet, forcing Hung Ch'a-ch'iu to retreat precipitately. The remnants of the invading army were captured by the Japanese; it is said that of 140,000 invaders, fewer than one in five escaped. The defeat of the Mongol invasions was of crucial importance in Japanese history. The military expenditure on preparations, continuous vigil, and actual fighting undermined the economic stability of the Kamakura government and led to the insolvency of many of the jitō. The bond between the Hōjō and the Kamakura vassals was strained to the breaking point. The invasions also led to another prolonged period of isolation from China that was to last until the 14th century. Moreover, the victory gave a great impetus to a feeling of national pride, and the kamikaze ("divine wind") that destroyed the invading hosts gave the Japanese the belief that they were a divinely protected people. Feudalism in Japan represents one of the most fascinating aspects of Japanese history, showcasing a complex social order that shaped the nation for centuries. From the rise of the samurai to the establishment of the shogunate, feudalism influenced land ownership, social hierarchy, and cultural traditions across medieval Japan. This article delves into the intricate tapestry of feudalism in Japan, exploring its key elements and lasting impact on Japanese society. Understanding Feudalism in Japan Feudalism in Japan, which flourished from the late 12th century until the 19th century, was characterized by a decentralized political structure where land was the primary source of wealth and power. The system was hierarchical, with the emperor at the top, followed by the shogun, daimyo, samurai, and peasants. This social order was not just a political arrangement but also a reflection of cultural values and traditions rooted in loyalty and honor. The Role of the Samurai Perhaps the most iconic symbol of feudalism in Japan is the samurai. These warriors were not merely soldiers; they embodied the cultural ethos of bushido, the way of the warrior. Bushido emphasized virtues such as loyalty, honor, and discipline. Samurai were often vassals to the daimyo, who were powerful feudal lords controlling large estates. In return for military service and loyalty, samurai received land or stipends, which provided them with the means to sustain their families. This relationship reinforced the social hierarchy, as the samurai class held significant power and influence. The samurai also played a crucial role in maintaining order and enforcing the will of their daimyo, often engaging in conflicts and battles to expand their lord's territories. The Shogunate: The Heart of Power The shogunate was the military government that effectively ruled Japan during the feudal period. Established by Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1192, the shogunate marked the beginning of a new political era. The shogun, as the de facto ruler, held more power than the emperor, who became a symbolic figurehead. The shogun commanded the loyalty of the samurai and the daimyo, maintaining control through a network of alliances and military strength. The most notable shogunates include the Kamakura, Ashikaga, and Tokugawa shogunates. Each of these regimes contributed to the evolution of feudalism in Japan, shaping its political landscape and cultural developments. The Daimyo: Lords of the Land Daimyo were powerful feudal lords who played a central role in the feudal system. They were landowners who governed vast territories, often comprising multiple villages. Each daimyo maintained their own samurai, creating a local military force that could be mobilized for defense or conquest. The relationship between daimyos and their samurai was based on mutual obligation, where loyalty was paramount. Land Ownership: Daimyo were responsible for land management and agricultural production within their territories. They collected taxes from the peasants, which funded their military and administrative activities. Political Influence: The daimyo wielded significant political power, often engaging in conflicts with rival lords to expand their holdings and influence. Cultural Patronage: Many daimyos were patrons of the arts and culture, contributing to the flourishing of traditional Japanese arts such as tea ceremonies, calligraphy, and Noh theater. The Social Hierarchy of Feudal Japan The social hierarchy of feudal Japan was rigid and stratified, with each class playing a specific role within the system. At the apex was the emperor, followed by the shogun, daimyo, samurai, and finally the peasants. This hierarchy dictated social interactions and relationships, emphasizing loyalty and duty at every level. Below the samurai were the peasants, who formed the backbone of the economy by working the land. Despite their lower status, peasants were respected for their vital role in sustaining the feudal system. They produced the agricultural surplus that supported the samurai and daimyo. Additionally, artisans and merchants occupied lower social standings, often viewed with disdain by the samurai class, who believed that trade and profit were beneath their noble status. However, as Japan transitioned into the early modern period, the influence of merchants began to grow, leading to significant societal changes. Cultural Traditions Shaped by Feudalism Feudalism in Japan profoundly influenced cultural traditions, many of which continue to resonate today. The samurai's code of conduct, bushido, instilled values that permeated various aspects of Japanese life, including literature, art, and philosophy. The samurai's commitment to loyalty and honor is still celebrated in modern Japanese culture. Moreover, the feudal era saw the development of unique cultural practices, such as: Tea Ceremony: An art form emphasizing harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility, reflecting the samurai's disciplined lifestyle. Noh and Kabuki Theatre: Traditional performing arts that often depicted samurai stories, illustrating the values and struggles of the time. Calligraphy and Painting: Artistic expressions that were refined during the feudal period, often patronized by the daimyo. The Decline of Feudalism in Japan Feudalism in Japan began to decline in the 19th century, particularly during the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The new government sought to modernize Japan, abolishing the feudal system and dismantling the shogunate. The samurai class lost their privileged status, and Japan underwent rapid industrialization and modernization. Despite its decline, the legacy of feudalism in Japan remains evident in modern society. Traditional values of loyalty and honor continue to permeate Japanese culture, and the influence of the samurai is celebrated in literature, films, and even in contemporary martial arts practices. Conclusion Feudalism in Japan was a complex system that shaped the social, political, and cultural landscape of the nation for centuries. The relationships between the emperor, shogunate, daimyo, samurai, and peasants created a unique social order that emphasized loyalty, honor, and duty. While the feudal system has long since vanished, its influence endures in modern Japan, reminding us of the rich tapestry of history that has shaped the nation. Understanding this intricate past allows us to appreciate the cultural traditions and values that continue to define Japan today. FAQs 1. What is feudalism in Japan? Feudalism in Japan was a social and political system that dominated from the 12th to the 19th century, characterized by a hierarchical structure where land ownership determined power and status. 2. Who were the samurai? Samurai were the warrior class in feudal Japan, known for their military skills and adherence to bushido, the code of honor that emphasized loyalty and discipline. 3. What role did the shogunate play in Japanese history? The shogunate was the military government that held actual power in Japan, overshadowing the emperor and controlling the samurai and daimyo, shaping Japan's political landscape for centuries. 4. How did land ownership influence feudalism in Japan? Land ownership was central to feudalism in Japan, determining wealth, power, and social status. Daimyo governed land and collected taxes from peasants, maintaining the feudal hierarchy. 5. What were the key cultural traditions of medieval Japan? Key cultural traditions included the tea ceremony, Noh theater, and various forms of art and literature that reflected the values of loyalty and honor inherent in samurai culture. 6. What led to the decline of feudalism in Japan? Feudalism in Japan declined during the 19th century due to the Meiji Restoration, which sought to modernize the country and dismantle the feudal system, leading to significant social and political changes. For further reading on Japanese history, you can visit Britannica. To explore the cultural heritage of Japan, check out Japan National Tourism Organization. This article is in the category Culture and Traditions and created by Japan Team How can financial brands set themselves apart through visual storytelling? Our experts explain how.Learn MoreThe Motorsport Images Collections captures events from 1895 to today's most recent coverage.Discover The CollectionCurated, compelling, and worth your time. Explore our latest gallery of Editors' Picks.Browse Editors' FavoritesHow can financial brands set themselves apart through visual storytelling? Our experts explain how.Learn MoreThe Motorsport Images Collections captures events from 1895 to today's most recent coverage.Discover The CollectionCurated, compelling, and worth your time. Explore our latest gallery of Editors' Picks.Browse Editors' FavoritesHow can financial brands set themselves apart through visual storytelling? Our experts explain how.Learn MoreThe Motorsport Images Collections captures events from 1895 to today's most recent coverage.Discover The CollectionCurated, compelling, and worth your time. Explore our latest gallery of Editors' Picks.Browse Editors' Favorites Feudal Japan was a period in Japanese history that lasted from the 12th to the 19th century. It was characterized by a hierarchical social structure, with power centralized in the hands of the shogun and the daimyo. The samurai, a warrior class, played a crucial role in maintaining order and protecting the interests of their lords. The emperor, although revered as a symbol of authority, held little actual power and often served as a figurehead. This feudal system provided stability and security, but also led to conflicts and power struggles among the ruling elite. The introduction of feudalism marked a significant shift in Japanese society and laid the foundation for the rise of the samurai and the eventual establishment of the shogunate.The Samurai ClassThe Samurai class played a crucial role in feudal Japan. They were the military nobility and served as the backbone of the ruling class. Samurai were skilled warriors who adhered to a strict code of conduct known as bushido. They were trained in various martial arts and were proficient in the use of weapons such as swords and bows. Samurai were loyal to their lords, known as daimyo, and fought for their honor and protection. They lived by a set of values that emphasized loyalty, honor, and self-discipline. Samurai were also responsible for maintaining law and order in their domains and were often involved in local governance. They were respected and feared by the common people, who relied on them for protection. The Samurai class played a significant role in shaping the political and social landscape of feudal Japan.The Role of the EmperorThe emperor in feudal Japan held a position of great importance and reverence. Although the emperor's power was largely ceremonial, they were considered the highest authority and symbol of the country's unity. The emperor was believed to be a direct descendant of the gods and was considered divine. They played a crucial role in legitimizing the rule of the shogun and the samurai class. The emperor's main responsibilities included performing religious rituals, granting titles and honors, and serving as a figurehead for the nation. Despite having limited political power, the emperor's influence on the culture and society of feudal Japan was immense.The Kamakura PeriodThe Rise of the Minamoto ClanThe rise of the Minamoto Clan marked a significant turning point in feudal Japan. Led by Minamoto no Yoritomo, the clan successfully overthrew the Taira Clan and established the Kamakura Shogunate. Yoritomo's leadership and strategic prowess were instrumental in consolidating power and bringing stability to the region. Under the rule of the Minamoto Clan, a new era of governance and social structure emerged, known as the Kamakura Period. This period witnessed the rise of the samurai class and the establishment of the Bushido code, a set of ethical principles that governed the behavior of the samurai. The Minamoto Clan's rise to power not only shaped the political landscape of Japan but also had a profound impact on the cultural and societal values of the time.The Mongol InvasionsThe Mongol Invasions were a series of military campaigns launched by the Mongol Empire against Japan in the 13th century. Led by the renowned Mongol leader Kublai Khan, these invasions aimed to conquer and subjugate Japan. The Mongols had already established a vast empire, stretching from China to Europe, and Japan was seen as the next target for expansion. The first invasion, known as the Mongol Invasion of Japan in 1274, saw a large Mongol fleet and army set sail for Japan. However, they faced strong resistance from the Japanese samurai and were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts to conquer the country. The second invasion, known as the Mongol Invasion of Japan in 1281, was even larger in scale, with an estimated 140,000 Mongol troops and a massive fleet of ships. Once again, the Japanese samurai, led by warriors such as Yoritomo Minamoto and Hōjō Tokimune, fiercely defended their homeland and repelled the Mongol forces. The Mongol Invasions had a significant impact on Japan's history, highlighting the resilience and military prowess of the samurai class. They also played a role in shaping Japan's isolationist policies in the following centuries.The Decline of the Kamakura ShogunateThe decline of the Kamakura Shogunate marked a pivotal turning point in the history of feudal Japan. The shogunate, which had been established by the Minamoto clan, faced numerous challenges that ultimately led to its downfall. One of the key factors contributing to the decline was the widespread corruption within the shogunate's administration. As the power of the shogunate weakened, regional lords known as daimyo began to assert their authority and challenge the central government. This power struggle further weakened the shogunate, leading to internal conflicts and a loss of control over the country. Additionally, external threats such as the Mongol invasions added to the shogunate's troubles. The failed attempts to repel the Mongol forces highlighted the vulnerability of Japan and the need for a stronger central authority. These challenges ultimately paved the way for the next period in Japanese history, the Muromachi period, and the rise of the Ashikaga Shogunate.The Muromachi PeriodThe Ashikaga ShogunateThe Ashikaga Shogunate, also known as the Muromachi Shogunate, was a feudal military government that ruled Japan from 1336 to 1573. It was established by Ashikaga Takauji, a samurai who rebelled against the Kamakura Shogunate. The Ashikaga Shogunate is often referred to as the Golden Age of Zen Buddhism, as it was during this period that Zen Buddhism flourished and had a significant influence on Japanese culture and art. The shogunate faced numerous challenges, including political instability, internal conflicts, and external invasions. One of the most significant events during the Ashikaga Shogunate was the Onin War, a devastating civil war that lasted for over a decade and resulted in widespread destruction and chaos. Despite these challenges, the Ashikaga Shogunate played a crucial role in shaping Japan's feudal society and laying the foundation for the future Tokugawa Shogunate.The Onin WarThe Onin War was a significant conflict that took place in Japan during the Muromachi Period. It was a civil war fought between two powerful samurai families, the Hosokawa and the Yamana. The war lasted for over a decade and resulted in widespread destruction and chaos. The conflict