Japan’s Middle Ages (1330–1600)

Historians today see the fourteenth century as marking a decisive break between ancient Japan and its middle ages. Political power became increasingly fragmented among contending military configurations, the court, ecclesiastical establishments, urban residents, and cultivator leagues. Trade networks expanded, carrying a greater variety of goods over longer distances than ever before, while urban markets supplied the needs of social and political elites as well as ordinary residents. Women exchanged economic autonomy for domestic authority. Samurai became moralists and poets. The fourteenth century began with conflict between samurai and the court. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw civil war. Europeans brought new weapons and a new religion in the middle of the sixteenth century. At its end, the world turned upside down: a commoner ruled Japan and sent his armies to invade Korea.

Historians disagree over who were significant political actors, the losers such as Go-Daigo, the religious establishment, and commoner leagues, or the winners among the samurai. Much of the dynamism in this period came from its unsettled margins. What impact did they have on the center? How did men and women protect their interests? How did the arts manage to flourish in the midst of unrest?

NEW POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS

The monarch Go-Daigo’s plan to restore power to the monarchy provided the catalyst for the Kamakura shogunate’s fall. In 1321 Go-Daigo got his father to agree to renounce the political power held by the retired monarch. Go-Daigo revived the monarchical records office and attracted able administrators who reasserted the royal prerogative of adjudicating lawsuits. Three years later the shogunate learned of his plots against it and arrested his accomplices. Go-Daigo continued
to insist on monarchical privilege. When the shogunate tried to force him to abdicate in favor of his cousin’s line in 1331, he called on loyalists across Japan to revolt.

Although the shogunate exiled Go-Daigo to the remote island of Oki, men all over Japan rallied to the monarchical cause. Some believed in it; others saw an opportunity to gain wealth and power. Ashikaga Takauji first led Kamakura’s legions against Kyoto and then switched sides. In 1333 his forces set fire to Kamakura. The Hōjō family and its retainers, over eight hundred men, women, and children, committed suicide. Takauji brought Go-Daigo back from exile, only to turn on him when forced to share spoils of war with members of the aristocracy. Having overcome a string of reversals, Takauji drove Go-Daigo out of Kyoto and placed his cousin on the throne. Takauji built his headquarters in the Muromachi section of Kyoto where he could supervise the new monarch and oversee his followers. Claiming descent from Minamoto Yoritomo to legitimize his rule, he had himself named shogun in 1338. Despite this title, the administrative structure that he and his successors put together over the next sixty years owed nothing to the Kamakura regime and everything to the exigencies of the moment.

Takauji’s victories over Go-Daigo did not bring peace to an increasingly militarized Japan. Go-Daigo’s sons established a rival southern court in the mountains of Yoshino that held out until 1392. The coexistence of two courts, northern and southern, allowed men to fight in the name of rival claimants to the throne, depending on which suited their interests. Takauji’s grandson Yoshimitsu brought an end to the rival courts by promising to alternate rule between their descendants. He later broke this promise. He brought recalcitrant fighters in Kyushu under his control, but he had less success with military leaders under a rival Ashikaga branch in eastern Japan. In 1402 he received the title “king of Japan” from the Ming emperor (a title not heretofore used in Japan although analogous to the Yi Dynasty’s ruler being titled “king of Korea”) and appeared poised to replace the monarchy with his son. His reign marked the high point of Ashikaga power. It declined thereafter, although the shogunate remained in Ashikaga hands to 1578.

The Ashikaga shoguns tried to rule Japan through a combination of family ties and marriage politics. As a gesture at institutional continuity with the Kamakura shogunate, they used the title of shugo (military governor). The shugo appropriated the administrative functions of the provincial governors appointed by the court. By the end of the fourteenth century, they had also taken over the responsibilities and the income of the estate stewards (jito). Fourteen shugo were branches of the Ashikaga family; the remaining seven, such as the Shimazu of Satsuma in Kyushu, lived far from Kyoto and supported the Ashikaga in return for a free hand at home. Shugo served as high officials, military governors, and the Ashikaga’s chief retainers. Takauji and his heirs exchanged women with shugo to maintain their allegiance and solidify alliances. Each ruled large, unwieldy territories defined in patents of appointment made by the shogun. The Ashikaga shoguns were the chief of the shugo and derived some of their income from being shugo of two provinces. They also controlled some sixty estates scattered across Japan.

The most important office under the shogun was the deputy shogun (kanrei), normally filled by the Shiba, Hatakeyama, or Hosokawa. They had prestige as the shogun’s close relatives, governing Japan’s richest provinces as shugo made them wealthy, and their office gave them authority. By combining these three constituents of power, they formed an inner bastion of support for the shogun. When they acted together on his behalf, they made it possible for him to dominate the other shugo and his retainers. When they quarreled, they tore the country apart.

The shugo normally supported the shogun because they also had weaknesses. Although they had jurisdictional authority over entire provinces, they did not control land. Even when a military man had managed to expropriate the aristocrats’ claims to income from estates, he
still had to contend with temples, other shugo, or even the shogun. Not all military families within a shugo’s province were his direct retainers. With increasing frequency, rustic warriors (kokujin) accepted no one as their overlord. The longer the shugo resided in Kyoto with the shogun, the more they relied on deputies to manage provincial administration. To intimidate their underlings, they needed the prestige bestowed by the shogun. The crucial problem left unsolved by both the Kamakura and Ashikaga regimes was how to maintain the connection between center and periphery. Unlike China, where a bureaucracy marinated in a common ideology was first gathered to the center, then dispatched to the provinces, Japan remained in danger of fragmentation.

Apologists for the Ashikaga wrote the history of the Kamakura regime in such a way as to provide precedents for the new relationship between the Ashikaga shoguns, the shugo, and the monarch. The shugo had much broader power than any single office at Kamakura. The monarchy had lost so much of its income and autonomy that one ruler had to put off his enthronement ceremony for twenty years because the shogun refused to fund it. The Kamakura regime had subsisted on a relatively small income generated from land. The Ashikaga shoguns cast their net more broadly, collecting fees to license both foreign and domestic trade, demanding kickbacks from temples, dunning the populace in the name of the monarch, and erecting toll barriers to tax commerce. Whereas during Kamakura times, monarch and shogun had ruled Japan together, if not to the same ends, during the Muromachi period, neither can be said to have exercised effective governance.

Changes in Roles for Women

Nothing better marks the break between ancient and medieval Japan than the changes that took place in the relationships between men and women, especially at the higher reaches of society. Even before the Mongol invasions, it had become clear that dividing property among all children, men and women alike, seriously weakened a family’s viability. At the same time, the fluidity in marriage arrangements that had characterized the Heian period largely disappeared. Women increasingly moved to their husband’s residence. If they took property with them, less was left for their brothers. Loath to bestow property on daughters or too many sons, powerful families selected a single heir. With women and their husbands out of the picture, brothers and cousins competed to inherit the family estate. Property rights in cultivator households evolved differently. Increases in agricultural productivity plus new commercial opportunities left more income in cultivator hands. Women as well as men traded in land and other goods. Women continued to manage their own property even when they moved into their husband’s household.

Marriages became more durable and of greater consequence. When seen as a way to ally two families, the exchange of betrothal gifts and the bride’s entry into her husband’s residence became ceremonies. Once ensconced in her new home, the bride served her parents-in-law as well as her husband. Her trousseau supplied her with what she needed for daily life, but she lost the autonomy that had come from owning real property. She became her husband’s property. No legal distinction was made between adultery and rape because both constituted crimes against the husband. On the other hand, the woman’s position as wife became much more secure. The elaboration of the marriage ceremony and its public character meant that only compelling political reasons justified divorce. If a man fathered children on a concubine, his wife became their official mother. A wife became the person primarily responsible for domestic affairs. When her husband was off at war, she managed the household economy and dispatched his supplies. A mark of her responsibilities was her title: midaidokoro (the lady of the kitchen).

Women at the Kyoto court had always participated in public ceremonies; during the medieval period, they assumed administrative functions
BIOGRAPHY

Hino Meishi

Aristocrat, official, mother, and writer, Hino Meishi (?–1358) lived through a time of high political intrigue and learned what it meant to be a wife while the family structure was in transition.

Meishi was the daughter of Hino Sukena who served the monarch Kōgon (r. 1331–1333). When she was about ten years old, she became a maid to Kōgon’s mother, Kōgimonin. Meishi developed an expertise in court ceremonies at Kōgon’s coming-of-age ceremony. When he was enthroned by the Kamakura shogunate as a replacement for Go-Daigo, she stood directly behind the new monarch.

While Meishi was fulfilling official public functions, sometime before 1331 she started a romance with Kōgimonin’s nephew, Kinmune, from the powerful Saisonji branch of the Fujiwara lineage. They continued to see each other while Kyoto was thrown into turmoil by Go-Daigo’s return, Kōgon’s dethronement, and her father’s involuntary decision to shave his head and become a monk. For a while they met at hideaways far from the eyes of their parents or their employers. In 1333 Meishi became Kinmune’s recognized consort when he wrote her a poem pledging his fidelity. He then visited her publicly at her father’s home and stayed the night. A few months later, the Saisonji family summoned Meishi to its main residence at Kitayama as Kinmune’s official wife, in a move that united two aristocratic opponents to Go-Daigo’s rule.

In 1335 Kinmune and Sukena were both arrested for having plotted against Go-Daigo. The night before Kinmune was to be exiled to Izumo, Meishi visited him at the mansion where he had been confined. They exchanged a tearful farewell, and Kinmune handed over several mementos. Before Meishi left, a messenger arrived with the news that Kinmune was to be transferred to another residence. As he was bending down to enter a palanquin, the messenger cut off his head. The pregnant Meishi fled to the Saisonji mansion, where she gave birth to her son, Sanetoshi. A messenger from Go-Daigo’s court arrived with an offer to find a wet nurse for the child. Kinmune’s mother told him that Meishi had miscarried to protect her grandson from his enemies. When the northern court was restored in 1337, Meishi used her connection with the now retired monarch Kōgen to promote her son and restore the Saisonji family to its former glory.

Meishi wrote a two-volume memoir. The first volume covers the period of her romance with Kinmune from 1329 to 1333; the second takes up the restoration of the northern court in 1337 and the revival of the Saisonji family fortunes. She thus omitted the years of turmoil that exposed the political calculations behind her marriage.


As the circle around the monarch shrank. (See Biography: Hino Meishi.) Only the highest-ranking aristocrats managed to survive the turmoil of the age; others rusticated to keep close to their sources of income. Women replaced them in running the monarch’s household, a transformation in female function seen especially in their writing. Earlier women’s diaries and memoirs had been subjective and recorded their lives and thoughts. Those from the fourteenth century and later recorded men’s deeds. Women also served as secretaries, writing letters and transmitting orders on behalf of monarch, regent, and shogun.
Trade in Town and Country

The fourteenth century saw a series of transformations in rural Japan. The conversion of dry fields to paddy, the growing of two crops per year, and the extensive use of irrigation made possible by water wheels brought increased yields, population growth, and commercial expansion. Estates split into corporate villages. On estates, each cultivator manager (myōshū) had his own distinct legal relationship with multiple overlords. In villages, former myōshū, who might also be warriors, plus smallholders dealt with overlords as a unit. They presented petitions for reductions in taxes and corvée labor, and they asserted corporate control over common land and irrigation systems. This process was hastened by the development of self-governing organizations encouraged by overlords as a way to replace the Kamakura-sanctioned estate stewards. Land rights became transferable commodities rather than being associated with office and status. During times of endemic social disorder when overlords were far away, cultivators banded together in nucleated villages, constructed walls and moats, and defended themselves. They met in committee to handle village administration—irrigation procedures and tax payments, for example—and deal with judicial issues. In central Japan these village assemblies took the form of shrine associations that discriminated between members according to status and gender. Many of today’s hamlets trace their names back to this century, suggesting the creation of a village identity that excluded outsiders and regulated the behavior of insiders.

Trade had spread in Kamakura times, but the early fourteenth century saw new developments. First was the monetization of commerce by relying on coins imported from Ming China. Although cultivators continued to present taxes in kind and bartering never disappeared, large and small transactions came to be denominated in cash. Second, commercial centers evolved out of places where people congregated: at toll barriers, river crossings, harbors, post houses, and the entrances to shrines and temples. Men and women from nearby villages brought their wares for sale, primarily vegetables, but also processed food such as bricks of tofu. As in earlier ages, proselytizers followed the crowds; some used pictures to teach faith in Amida or to warn of the torments of hell. Nuns solicited donations for the Kumano temple complex. The authorities tried to keep people tied to a specific place and required that travelers carry a passport. Markets received a dispensation from such regulation, making them a zone where people could mingle and exchange goods and information.

The third development centered on the spread of guilds (za). They first appeared in the twelfth century and reached their peak in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. The idea behind a guild was that the traders or artisans dealing in a specific product would pay a fee to a patron (court noble, religious establishment, shogun) and receive two privileges in exchange: a monopoly on the sale or production of their product and the right to travel in pursuit of trade. Comb makers, sesame oil producers, metal casters, and potters all joined guilds. Many of them lived in the countryside, where they were listed in land records as hyakushō (the hundred names). Although this term came to specify cultivators in the seventeenth century, in the fourteenth century it simply meant anyone who was not an aristocrat or warrior. It thus included fishermen, salt makers, and other people who did not grow crops. Horse traders from central Japan relied for centuries on a monarchical decree that gave them exclusive rights to trade in horses. They expanded their monopoly to everything carried by horses from the Pacific to the Japan Sea. Not until modern times did researchers discover that the decree was a forgery.

Kyoto functioned as both the political and economic center of Japan. The court, shogunate, and religious establishments competed as well as cooperated to control and tax commoners in cross-cutting systems of overlord authority that made for interdependence, exploitation, and tax evasion. During the Kamakura period, low-ranking monks from Enryakuji on Mount Hiei had begun to brew and sell sake and lend
Female Moneylender. This segment from a twelfth-thirteenth century scroll of diseases (yamai no sōshi) depicts a female moneylender so suffering from obesity brought on by her wealth that she needs help to walk. (Fukuoka Art Museum)

money. By the fourteenth century, wealthy moneylenders provided cash loans to aristocrats, warriors, townspeople, and cultivators at annual interest rates of up to 300 percent. Enryakuji issued business licenses and ran a protection racket, fending off attempts by other overlords to tax the moneylenders and helping to collect debts. As lobbyist for its clients, Enryakuji paid stipends to shogunal officials to protect their interests, and moneylenders bribed them to grant tax exemptions. The shoguns made prominent moneylenders their storehouse keepers and later their tax agents in return for 10 percent of the take and the prestige of an official appointment, although the relationship was more ad hoc than bureaucratic. The shogunate’s income shrank while individual officials grew rich.

The shogunate strove mightily to control and profit from the maritime trade that flourished regardless of political boundaries. Seafarers of mixed ethnicities pursued trade and piracy with equal aplomb, ravaging the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese coasts. Communities of foreign traders thrived in all the port cities of East Asia, including Japan. The Ming Dynasty closed China to foreign commerce after 1368, with the only exception being official trade carried on between states under the rubric of tribute. In 1402, the Chinese emperor agreed to provide two ships a year with the official seal that allowed them to trade in China. By 1465, two shugo had taken over the trade, although the shogunate continued to assess a fee of 10 percent on private merchandise. Late-fourteenth-century state formation in the Ryukyu Islands led three principalities to merge into one under King Sho Hashi in 1429. The Ryukyuans sent tribute missions to China and received official permission to pursue trade. As a maritime nation, they sailed their ships from Southeast Asia to Japan and Korea. Through their delegations to the shogunate, piracy, and legitimate trade, Japan participated in economic networks stretching across the East Asia seas and established a community in Vietnam’s Hoi An. In the sixteenth century, these networks brought Europeans in search of trade and Christian converts. (See Connections: Europe Enters the Scene.)

Life on the Margins
Trade did not alleviate the disruptions caused by crop failures. Famines forced desperate people to sell themselves into bondage, a form of slavery that could last for generations. Disease was another scourge. Leprosy terrorized people in Japan as it did in Europe. The afflicted suffered increasing disfigurement as their flesh rotted away. How could it be other than a punishment for evil committed in a previous life? Lest they contaminate the healthy with their pollution, lepers had to leave their families and join groups of paupers, the infirm, and entertainers, referred to as the people of the riverbank (kawaramono).

The kawaramono were outcasts. They included people whose occupations brought them into contact with things deemed to be polluting, death in particular. Tanners, butchers, policemen, and undertakers were excluded from
ordinary society. For them, the only fit habitation was on untaxed land that nobody wanted. Occasionally riverbank people were hired to cleanse a shrine after it had been desecrated by fire or the loss of life in a fight. Purifying the shrine involved the dirty work of removing dead bodies. Such rites performed by outcasts suggest a social imagination in which two negatives become a positive and the power to purify lies with the impure.

Other people used marginal spaces carved out of ordinary life as temporary refuges. Markets, river crossings, the entrances to temples and shrines, and graveyards offered sanctuary to unfree people fleeing bondage. Mountains provided shelter for entire villages that absconded to protest unjust taxes or forced labor. Another form of protest was for groups of warriors or cultivators to dress in the persimmon-colored robes reserved for lepers. It was a desperate measure because it cut them off from normal human interaction. It worked because spaces set apart from ordinary life were under the inviolable protection of the deities and Buddhas.

Changes in Religious Practice

An important characteristic of Japan's Middle Ages was the power of the Buddhist establishment. Although Ashikaga shoguns dominated the court, they had to conciliate the temples that largely controlled the urban economy and had their own police force as well as deep roots in the lives of Japanese people. The major temples that had received support from the Heian court continued to flourish; the popular sects that originated in the Kamakura period attracted sometimes vehement converts. Zen Buddhism made major contributions to Japanese aesthetics and played an important political role.

Rather than patronize the temples already entrenched in the Kyoto court, Ashikaga shoguns preferred the Rinzai Zen sect. At the suggestion of a Zen monk, Takauiji and his son set up official temples named Ankokuji (temples for national peace) in each province to console Go-Daigo's spirit and raise the shogun's prestige. They also had pagodas built in the precincts of temples belonging to other sects for the same purpose. Later shoguns promoted and ranked Zen temples in Kyoto and Kamakura in loose accord with the system already developed for Zen (Chan) temples in China. Priests jockeying for position and shogunal preference meant that the ranking shifted considerably. By 1410, ten temples enjoyed the top rank of "five mountains" (gozan), and all the Kyoto temples ranked above their Kamakura counterparts. Next in importance were the sixty-odd "ten temples" (jissatsu). At the bottom were the "multitude of temples," patronized by powerful provincial families. Many had originally been temples of other sects that changed their affiliation to Zen to become part of this ranking system that bestowed prestige and connections to the center on its affiliates.

The Ashikaga established a hierarchy of priests that aligned the Rinzai sect even more closely with its fortunes. When Yoshimitsu built Shōkokuji next to his palace on Muromachi Street in 1382, he had the chief Rinzai priest reside there. This priest decided appointments to the heads of the Rinzai temples, recommended promotions, and determined ceremonial procedures. Owing to his prowess in the Chinese language, he prepared documents related to maritime trade and foreign affairs. In the fifteenth century, the shogunate appointed men from aristocratic families to this position, with the result that the chief priest often had little interest in routine administration or religious observances.

As the Rinzai school became increasingly associated with the dominant power structure, its teachings and practice moved further from what is conventionally associated with Zen. Instead of seeking the path to enlightenment through meditation, Rinzai became syncretic. It absorbed secret teachings and incantations from esoteric Buddhism that had proved popular with the aristocracy. Even in provincial temples, question-and-answer sessions between master and disciple took a fixed form based on oral tradition handed down in secret. In Kyoto the chief
priests participated with the military and civilian aristocracy in literary and artistic pursuits. Yoshida Shinto (also called Yuitsu Shinto—“one and only”) opposed Zen Buddhism and Buddhist-Shinto syncretism by insisting on the worship of deities only as deities rather than as bodhisattvas. Based on his claim to a tradition stretching back to the creation of Japan through his Urabe lineage of court diviners, Yoshida Kanetomo (1435–1511) invented Shinto rituals that spread across Japan. Some had an open, esoteric dimension accessible to ordinary worshipers. Secret esoteric rituals for initiates surprisingly similar to Buddhist rites drew on Buddhist hand gestures called mudras and used quotations from Nihon shoki in place of mantras. Yoshida Shinto dogma and practice reasserted the centrality of the monarch in indigenous terms and rescued Shinto from complete submersion in Buddhism.

Muromachi Culture

The cult of sensibility (aware) from the Heian period and the Kamakura aesthetic characterized by austerity were combined in the fifteenth century into a notion of beauty and elegance modified by stern simplicity. The key term was yugen, used to describe the profound, the remote, the mysterious—a term taken from Nō, the quintessential dramatic form of the day. (See Material Culture: Nō.) In Nō every gesture must be refined, the dance graceful, and the language elevated. The most meaningful moments are those when the actor’s unspoken, unmoving spiritual presence allows the audience a glimpse of the inexpressible. The same search for the presence behind the form can be seen in monochrome ink brush painting wherein the spaces left blank give shape to the composition, flower arranging based on the asymmetrical placement of a blossom or two, and the tea ceremony.

Zen permeated the arts and architecture of the time. Natural settings depicted in ink brush paintings became allegories to doctrinal points just as did the late-fifteenth-century rock garden at Ryōanji. Raked white sand surrounds fifteen rocks, only fourteen of which are visible from any one perspective. It takes the experience of enlightenment to grasp all fifteen at once. Partly inspired by Song Dynasty architecture, the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) and its pond built in 1398 were designed to model paradise. Ashikaga Yoshimasu built the Silver Pavilion (Ginkakuji), a more modestly refined building, seventy-five years later. A truncated cone of white sand designed to reflect moonlight on the pavilion dominates its Zen garden.

Literary arts also reflected Buddhist influence. Between 1310 and 1331, the poet and recluse Yoshida Kenkō wrote Essays in Idleness, a collection of reflections on his time, didactic statements, and meditations, all suffused with longing for the past. In the late fourteenth century, stories about the conflict between the northern and southern courts coalesced in Taiheiki (Records of Great Pacification). Castigating Ashikaga Takauji as a traitor and emphasizing the legitimacy of the southern court, this late military history became a favorite of storytellers. Ghost stories, didactic tales, folktale, testimonials to the saving power of the Buddha, and sermons were sold in booklets later called otogi zōshi (chapbooks).

The tea ceremony, from which women were excluded, assimilated warriors and priests to aristocratic standards of taste. In the first century of Ashikaga rule, imbibing bitter green tea provided the occasion for parties at which the host displayed his finest art treasures in a beautifully appointed sitting room overlooking a garden. With the coming of warfare in the late fifteenth century, this florid style gave way to a simpler, more ritualized and disciplined ceremony performed in a modest hut. Instead of richly decorated Chinese vessels, the emphasis shifted to plain, often misshapen pots because the aesthetic of the time expressed in the combination of wabi and sabi (elegant simplicity) celebrated the beauty of imperfect objects. The practitioners included provincial samurai and merchants from Kyoto and Sakai who found the tea ceremony an excellent excuse to mingle with...
Combining music, dance, and story, No drew on rural dances that appealed to the gods for good harvests, comical skits, popular songs, and tales told by jongleurs. The early spectacles were vulgar and exuberant, attracting crowds of people from all walks of life. At a performance in 1349, monks solicited donations, princes and the Fujiwara regent were among the spectators, and thieves tried to steal the actors' costumes.

Protégé and lover of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Zeami transformed No into art. In some plays he took themes from The Tale of Genji, and in others he used the elevated diction of the court to recast The Tale of the Heike. He crafted stories about ghosts, condemned by jealous passion or murderous deed to wander the netherworld between death and salvation. Not content to remain spectators, the shoguns and daimyo performed No and made it a state ceremony.

The accouterments of No are simple yet elegant. The wooden stage is bare, with a pine tree painted across the backdrop. The musicians and chorus perform on drums and flute for one or two performers. Men in black arrange costumes and provide the occasional prop. One performer wears a mask denoting men and women of various ages, gods, the possessed, and demons. Subtle movements of the head combined with skilful carving lend these masks great expressive power. In contrast to the stern simplicity of the set, the robes are of brilliant brocade, their glitter designed to catch the light from the torches that light the stage.

No Performance. One detail on a folding screen showing scenes in and around Kyoto depicts a No performance in the early sixteenth century.
(National Museum of Japanese History/DNPArchives.com)
aristocrats. Linked verse (renge), a collaborative form of poetry writing, provided a venue for the talented but lowborn to attract attention. Traveling priests such as Sōchō carried the practices of poetry and tea to provincial strongmen across Japan. (See Documents: The Journal of Sōchō.)

In contrast to the Zen-influenced arts of earlier times, exuberant color characterized the Momoyama period at the end of the sixteenth century. Epitomized in Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s golden tearoom, parvenu extravagance marked lacquer boxes dusted with gold, and wall paintings with gold leaf background. Vividly painted screens depicted European traders and missionaries and celebrated local customs. (See Color Plate 17.) Artistic triumphs based on technological innovation led to elaborate textile designs and towering castle keeps.

CIVIL WAR

The hundred years of civil war that began with the Ōnin conflict of 1467–1477 diffused elite cultural practices across the country. The breakdown of unified public authority spurred innovations from military organization to village life. Estates vanished. Buddhist temples lost power and income when they were not simply destroyed. Without their protection, the Kyoto moneylenders and other guild organizations disappeared. Territorial units of domains and villages replaced the former patchwork of competing jurisdictions.

Succession disputes provided the pretext for retainers and overlords to push their own interests. In the Hatakeyama case, the aging shugo first appointed a nephew to be his heir, but when a son was born to his concubine, he tried to have his decision reversed. In the 1450s, powerful retainers and the shogunal deputy backed the nephew and got the shogun to censure the son. Son and nephew fought on the political front, each being censured three times and forgiven three times, and on the military front where their retainers demanded rewards after each battle. This conflict foreshadowed the dispute in the Ashikaga house when Yoshimasa appointed his younger brother his successor, only to be forced to change his mind when his wife, Hino Tomiko, gave birth to Yoshihisa in 1465. Her dedication to her son’s future shows how family loyalties had changed from Hōjō Masako’s day. Already at odds over the Hatakeyama dispute, the two chief shugo each picked a rival claimant.

The shugo fought their first battles in and around Kyoto in 1467. Their chief weapon was arson, used to punish and exorcise enemies. Temples, aristocratic mansions, and the treasures of the ages burned. Commanders marched armies through the streets to intimidate their opponents. When they fought, they did so during the day, and seldom did they pursue a fleeing adversary. In the early years, a defeated opponent might be sent into exile or allowed to retire to a monastery. Later, a demand for retribution led to the slaughter of hostages and prisoners, the mutilation of corpses, the lacquering of an enemy’s skull for use as a drinking cup. By the end of the Ōnin war, Kyoto’s palaces had become fields, the shugo had become pawns of their erstwhile retainers when they had not disappeared, and Yoshihisa had inherited an empty office. He died in 1489 while trying to subdue a recalcitrant retainer who had organized rustic warriors in Ōmi to expropriate estates that paid tithes to nobles and temples.

The shogunate became irrelevant to power struggles that rent Japan. Shugo families split in fratricidal disputes over titles and the power to control land holdings that they conferred. Retainers embroiled themselves in factional disputes or betrayed one lord for another. Believing their honor to be at stake in every encounter, they fought bloody duels over imagined slights. Fortunately for the residents of Kyoto, even before the Ōnin war drew to an inconclusive close in 1477, battlefields had shifted to the provinces, closer to the spoils of war.

Local Leagues

The power vacuum at the top provided an opportunity for locally based leagues (ikki)—literally,
The Journal of Sōchō

Written by Saiokuken Sōchō, an acclaimed master of linked verse and a Zen monk, these entries show how the poet received commissions to write poetry from a high shogunal official amid the ravages of civil war. During his travels around central Japan in search of patrons and poetic inspiration, Sōchō turned a critical eye on his society in describing people on the margins, merchants, sake brewers, impoverished samurai, and lazy priests.

1522: We crossed to Ominato harbor in Ise and proceeded to Yamada, where we visited Ise shrine. The matter had been raised earlier of a thousand-verse sequence to be presented to the shrine, and I had invited the priest Sōseki down for that purpose. He arrived near the end of the seventh month, and we began composing the sequence soon thereafter, on the fourth of the eighth month. Two hundred verses a day for five days. The work was commissioned as a votive sequence by the present shogunal deputy, Hosokawa Takakuni, when he returned to the capital from Omi. His opening verse (hokku) for the first hundred verses was sent from Kyoto:

Everywhere aglow
in the morning sunlight—
the haze!

Takakuni
Plum trees blossom,
willows bend, and even
the wind abates!

Sōchō

Sōseki then left for Owari. Knowing it was likely to snow before long, I decided to set out for the north on the sixteenth. There has been fighting in this province beyond Kumozu river and Anonotsu, making it difficult to get from place to place.

Anonotsu has been desolate for more than ten years, and nothing but ruins remains of its four or five thousand villages and temples. Stands of reeds and mugwort, no chickens or dogs, rare even to hear the cawing of a crow.

1525: Ashihina Tokishige came to visit. We had a pleasant conversation by the hearth about frustrations at year’s end, the repayment of loans, the allotment of rice stipends, and the lack of enough of anything, during the course of which I rambled on in my dotage as follows:

Item. There is nothing like going into business for profit. People who do so never speak of gods or Buddhas, give no thought to the world’s prosperity or decline, know nothing of the elegant pursuits of snow, moon, and blossoms, grow distant from friends, reject appeals from their near and dear, and spend every waking moment thinking of making money. But that is how to get on in the world. Note, though, that those with even nominal lands, and monks with temple properties, should not take an interest in business. But note too that the sake dealers in the capital, Sakai, the Southern Capital, Sakamoto, and also in this part of the country do very well.

Item. Consider the low-ranking samurai, starving with no land to call his own. There is no help for him. He obviously cannot part from his wife and children. Their food runs

union of minds) to escape from the vertical hierarchies that had tied them to aristocratic, ecclesiastical, and military patrons. In 1487 rustic warriors in Yamashiro united province-wide to resist the incursions of overlords. Theirs was a horizontal alliance of self-reliant men of no particular pedigree. They developed tactics of mass demonstrations organized village by village. On
out, and the woman must draw water and the man must gather brushwood. Their children are taken away before their eyes to slave for others. Their bowing and scraping is pitiful. Driven to that pass, those with self-respect may even do away with themselves. Someone said that to such unfortunates one should give a little something. That is the essence of charity. Of course one must give as well to those who beg by the roadside and wait by houses and gates.

Item. Lion dancers, monkey trainers, bell ringers, bowl beaters, and the like have something they can do for a living. People somehow provide for them, though their need is no greater than that of those I have just mentioned. It is the latter, for whom there is no help at all, who are the world's true unfortunates, even more than lepers and beggars. They are truly wretched.

Item. People who pursue the study of Zen are embarked on a difficult and estimable course. But those who are perfidious in their Zen practice, even highly placed samurai in the capital and provinces, easily fall into error.

Item. Where today can one find an inspirational teacher of the doctrines of "separate transmission outside the teachings" and "nonverbalization"? Some call today’s Zen practitioners a pack of devils, of the lowest guttersnipe sort. Abbots, monks, and novices these days consort with the high and mighty, curry donations from provincial gentry, pursue their austerities only when it suits them, run hither and yon all day, and daily with other practitioners. But who are the masters they practice with themselves? Some say it is far better to repeat the Holy Name [of Amida]. I am more attracted to those who follow a simple and ignorant practice, as I do.

Item. Acquiring bows, horses, and armor and maintaining good retainers—that is the way of the samurai. But there is no need to run out and buy things for which one has no specific purpose. Constant spending and extravagance must be avoided, I am told.

1526, fourth month: We crossed the Mountain of Meeting and entered the capital at Awataguchi without meeting a soul. This route used to be filled with horses and palanquins, everyone bumping shoulders and tilting hats to squeeze by. As I looked out over the city, I saw not one in ten of the houses that had been there formerly, either rich or poor. The sight of tilled fields around farmhouses, with the Imperial Palace in the midst of summer barley, was too much for words.

1527: On the fourth of the third month I left Yashima. A village called Minakuchi [Water's mouth] in Kōga continued for about ten chō, and I recalled the old palace built here once for an imperial pilgrimage to Ise. There are many toll gates in these parts, and as we went along people would shout "Stop! Toll!" at every one, whereupon I composed the following:

I must have appeared at the water’s mouth, for at every gate "Stop! Toll!" is what they cry together.

sectors—for defense and in building fortifications. (See Map 13.1.) They had already organized neighborhood associations for crime prevention, mutual protection, and firefighting. When the shogun proved unable to defend the city, the associations hired mercenaries. Many moneylenders helped build the temple fortresses belonging to the Lotus sect that dominated the commoners' religious life.

The Lotus League (bokke ikki) attracted adherents in urban areas with its exclusive faith in the saving power of the Lotus Sutra. In teaching that this world can be the Buddhist paradise, it encouraged worldly success. It provided institutional support independent of traditional elites, thus making it feasible for moneylenders to end their subordination to Enryakuji. It supported a paramilitary organization useful in times of disorder. With the shogun on the run after 1521, believers in the Lotus Sutra massed in tens of thousands not only to defend the city but to attack military commanders and adherents of different Buddhist sects. They withheld some rents, collected taxes, and settled disputes, in effect setting up a commoner-run city government, though the merchants in Sakai went further in developing the instruments of self-rule. Enryakuji was the first to organize opposition to the league, soon joined by a military commander in Omi. In eight days of fighting in 1536, the attackers destroyed all the Lotus temples, burned the entire lower city and one-third of the upper, and slaughtered men, women, and children suspected of being true believers. Kyoto suffered worse damage than it had during the Onin war. From a military point of view, suppression had to be brutal because the Hokke teachings placed commoners on the same level as their masters.
The most radical renunciation of allegiance to overlords came in the One-Mind Leagues (*ikkō ikki*) that flourished in central Japan after the Onin war. Adherents to the True Pure Land school of Buddhism believed that Amida offered salvation to all who accepted his gift of faith. Since everyone was equal in Amida’s eyes, the One-Mind Leagues rejected both religious and secular hierarchies. Although their adherents lived in largely autonomous communities organized around a lay teacher and temple, they were linked to a nationwide organization through the sect’s headquarters situated in the fortified temple complex called Ishiyama Honganji built in Osaka in 1532. The most militant and long lasting of the One-Mind Leagues on the Noto peninsula held out against warlords from 1488 to 1578.

**Rise of Warlords**

Out of the same crucible of lawlessness and disorder that produced *ikki* appeared military men determined to create a new vertical hierarchy. Unlike the *shugo* who depended on the shogun for patents of rule, the new leaders, called *daimyo*, relied on nothing other than military force. Daimyo constructed domains from the inside out. They ignored provincial boundaries in favor of natural defenses—rivers, mountains, and seas. Their domains were much smaller than those held by the former *shugo*, but they were more secure. To the impoverishment of the Kyoto aristocrats and temples, they tolerated no absentee proprietors. In order to survive, monarch and court sold themselves as arbiters of taste and erected toll barriers to tax goods in transit.

Warlords acquired territory through conquest, alliance, or marriage. Territory came with fighting men, the samurai, and cultivators, often one and the same. Samurai were incorporated into the warlord’s retainer band through an oath of loyalty in return for land or perhaps a stipend. Sometimes this meant confirming a samurai’s hold over the land he brought with him, though when possible warlords preferred to move retainers to a different area, often with the promise of a raise, in order to break their ties with former supporters. Even village headmen swore allegiance to a warlord in return for protection. They were expected to fight in time of war in addition to cultivating their land, maintaining order, and collecting taxes.

Warlords tried to mold their territories and retainer bands into a cohesive unit. They surveyed land to find out how much it produced and who was responsible for its taxes. They promoted irrigation works to open new land. They forbade cultivators to move away. They relaxed restrictions on commerce. They issued laws to maintain order and tame the samurai. They suppressed private feuds by announcing that in cases of quarrels, both sides would be judged equally guilty and punished accordingly. They wrote house codes that warned against fomenting factions or indulging in luxury. Income and responsibility rewarded dedication to duty, loyalty, and obedience. In this way, warlords created competing power blocs, centered on castle towns, each based on the principle of vertical hierarchy.

The most notable warlords of the sixteenth century were self-made men who rose from obscurity to become mighty conquerors, a process summarized in the term *gekokujō* (the overthrow of those above by those below). Maeda Toshiie of Kaga started his career as a low-ranking retainer. He initiated land surveys and reorganized his retainer band to reduce its autonomy. Takeda Shingen fought nearly constantly from age twenty to his death. Realizing that military force legitimizes nothing, he claimed that his quest for personal gain was done in the name of public authority (*kōgi*). The political experiments tried by Maeda, Takeda, and others laid the groundwork for Japan’s unification through military conquest.

**The Conquerors**

The earliest conqueror was Oda Nobunaga, born to a junior branch of an obscure lineage. His first accomplishment was to wipe out his kin. He
brought masterless samurai who had been living by robbery and extortion into his retainer band and demanded that they swear loyalty to him personally. Although Nobunaga commanded fewer troops than his opponents, he used them more effectively. He marched on Kyoto in 1568 on the pretext of installing Ashikaga Yoshiaki as shogun. There he provided sorely needed material assistance to the impoverished court. When Yoshiaki proved recalcitrant, Nobunaga drove him out of Kyoto in 1573, bringing the Ashikaga Dynasty to an ignominious end.

Nobunaga's signal achievement was to destroy the Buddhist temples' military, economic, and political power. He began with Enryakuji, which had allied with his enemies after he seized some of its land. In 1571 he burned three thousand buildings in its temple complex on Mount Hiei and massacred the monks. By threat or force, he expropriated the holdings of several other monasteries and ordered them to reduce their personnel. Between 1570 and 1580 he waged war against the Ikko ikki, showing no mercy to its adherents and slaughtering tens of thousands. To destroy the fortified headquarters at Ishiyama Honganji, he built armored ships outfitted with cannon. As a result of his efforts, the power of the Buddhist establishment, which had characterized Japan's Middle Ages, was permanently eliminated.

As befitted a man who aspired to bring the entire realm under one military regime, Nobunaga designed new economic and social policies. He freed merchants from having to seek the protection of guilds in return for monetary contributions called “thank-you money.” He eliminated toll barriers within the areas he controlled. He tried to stabilize the exchange rates between different types of coins, and he minted his own, the first time since 958 that a Japanese government had issued currency. He collected tax registers to gauge how much his land was worth and assert his authority over its disposal. In this way, he could argue that his retainers held their ancestral lands only at his pleasure. They had to be willing to move from place to place as he deemed fit; otherwise they would be marked as traitors and destroyed. Fearing Nobunaga's growing power, one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide, launched a surprise attack on Nobunaga in 1562. Nobunaga and his son committed suicide.

Nobunaga’s avenger, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, exemplified the social turbulence of the time. He came from little more than cultivator stock, rising through his own efforts to become hegemon of Japan. Although Nobunaga had pacified central Japan, independent warlords still controlled northern Japan and most of the western reaches of Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Hideyoshi either subdued them or so intimidated them that they acknowledged him as overlord. When he defeated the Shimazu of Satsuma in 1586, he allowed them to keep a portion of their domain, and he did the same for the Mōri of Chōshū. Preferring the security of subordination to the vicissitudes of battle, the northern warlords surrendered without a fight after he defeated the Hōjō (no relation to the Kamakura Hōjō) at Odawara in 1590. For the first time in over 250 years, Japan had a single ruler.

Although Hideyoshi epitomized the self-made man and created a new government structure, he looked to the monarchy to validate his rule. He rebuilt the Kyoto palace and paid for court ceremonies. He took the name Fujiwara and had himself appointed retired regent (taikō). He allowed his chief supporters and even his rivals to remain as daimyō of domains, though he carefully interspersed them to prevent collusion. He rewarded his faithful supporter Tokugawa Ieyasu with the eight Kantō provinces after the defeat of the Hōjō in a move that shifted Ieyasu from his homeland in Mikawa to an unfamiliar region swarming with rustic warriors. Hideyoshi commanded enormous resources through the land he controlled and his taxes on commerce in Osaka and Sakai. Rather than spend his own money, he had the daimyō pay for construction projects and provide military service on demand. He created an ideological basis for his rule by claiming descent from the sun god who had entered his mother’s womb, a drama he enacted on the Nō stage for the benefit of aristocrats, daimyō, and foreign visitors.
Desiring order and stability above all, Hideyoshi tried to ensure that no one would be able to rise as he had. Building on the work of his rivals, he instituted a nationwide land survey to determine the extent of arable land and to fix a name to every plot. Hideyoshi’s land survey marked the beginning of efforts to quantify landholdings and estimate tax revenues. By eliminating intermediary claims to landed income, the land survey marked the end of the largely defunct estates. He ordered subsidiary castles torn down and destroyed the remaining fortified neighborhoods in Kyoto. In 1588, he also tried to insist on a rigid status distinction between samurai and commoners by forbidding all but samurai from wearing two swords, one long and one short. Thereafter, commoners might own swords, but they could not put them on display. Hideyoshi issued a series of decrees prohibiting samurai from leaving their lord’s service to become merchants or cultivators and preventing farmers from deserting their fields to become city folk. Although it proved impossible to make clear distinctions between various statuses and some domains such as Satsuma or Tosa continued to recognize rustic samurai (gōshi), Hideyoshi’s intent remained the law of the land until 1871.

In 1592, Hideyoshi turned his attention to an invasion of Korea. He mobilized 158,000 samurai supported by 9,200 sailors and kept 100,000 men as a backup force, one indication of how heavily militarized Japanese society had become. In his most grandiloquent pronouncements, Hideyoshi promised to conquer both Korea and China and put the Japanese monarch on the Chinese throne with Hideyoshi’s adopted heir as regent. (He later withdrew the adoption when his concubine bore a son.) The first invasion went as far as Pyongyang. It drove the
Korean king from Seoul, decimated the regular Korean army, and devastated the countryside. It was forced to retreat when supplies ran low, the Ming came to Korean aid, and the Korea admiral Yi Sunsin won a major sea battle with armored ships and cannon. Hideyoshi tried again in 1597. When he died the next year, the Japanese troops in Korea decamped to participate in the succession dispute to come.

Hideyoshi had hoped to pass his dominion to his son by establishing a balance of power in the five-man advisory council created shortly before his death. Its most powerful member was Tokugawa Ieyasu, who like Nobunaga and Hideyoshi came from an obscure background in central Japan. Ieyasu strengthened his retainers' devotion and loyalty by making them completely dependent on him for their rewards. Rather than kill his kin, he left them with the original Matsudaira name when he took the Tokugawa name in 1566. He honored them as his relatives while he relied on men he had made to be his advisers and generals. Upon moving from central Japan to the Kantō plain, he turned the village of Edo into his castle town and started to build an administrative and personnel system based on the initiatives of his peers. He fought only those battles he knew he could win. By the time the advisory council fell apart in 1600, he had neutralized, compromised, or won over most of his rivals.

The battle of Sekigahara in 1600 brought the civil wars to a close. Although Hideyoshi's son remained ensconced in Osaka castle, his supporters were samurai who had lost their masters (rōnin) and other warriors who found that peace left little outlet for their talents. When Ieyasu decided to move against the castle in two campaigns in 1615 and 1616, the resistance was fierce but futile. Another threat to peace was the Shimabara Christian rebellion of 1637 in Kyushu, the last of the religiously based ikki. Like its predecessors, it was suppressed with the slaughter of approximately ten thousand men, women, and children. Its end marked the last military conflict Japan was to suffer for over two hundred years.

**SUMMARY**

The warfare of the middle ages destroyed Japan's estate system and forged new political institutions from the ground up. Although religion continued to be important in people's lives, religious institutions lost economic and political power. Shifting patterns in marriage and inheritance practices affirmed patriarchal authority in the ruling class. The popularity of the tea ceremony among merchants prefigured the spread of popular culture centered on townspeople.

**SUGGESTED READING**