

15.6 Significant individual: Minamoto no Yoritomo

Minamoto no Yoritomo was a warrior chief of the Yamato clan who, in 1192 CE, was named the first shogun by the emperor. As the shogun, Yoritomo wielded huge amounts of political and military power. He set up his own capital in Kamakura, far to the east of the emperor's capital in Kyoto. In Kamakura, he would be free to rule without interference from the emperor. He was the first in a line of shoguns who would go on to rule Japan for the next 700 years.

The emergence of a warrior class

Until the end of the 12th century, Japan was still ruled by the emperor and his government from the Imperial Palace in Kyoto. At this time, the decisions made by the emperor were very heavily influenced by members of the Fujiwara clan (who were trusted advisors at court). However, the emperor's government focused almost completely on life and affairs in the capital, and neglected to pay attention to the provinces that surrounded them. Because of this, from about the 10th century onwards, a new warrior class emerged to provide order and control in the provinces that the emperor had neglected.

By the 12th century, this new warrior class was dominated by two great clans – the Minamoto and the Taira. During the late 11th and early 12th centuries, warlords from the Minamoto and Taira clans began to participate more and more in the politics of the Imperial Court. After two armed conflicts in Kyoto, in 1156 and 1159, the Taira succeeded in replacing the Fujiwara as the most powerful clan in Japan.

Yoritomo's rise to power

Yoritomo was only 12 years old at the time of the 1159 conflict, in which the Taira defeated the Minamoto. The Minamoto clan was led by Yoritomo's father, who was killed in the conflict. In defeat, Yoritomo was sent into exile in the eastern provinces of Japan by the Taira leader.

During the next 20 years, the Taira clan became very powerful. However, like the Fujiwara clan before them, they continued to focus on the affairs of the capital and neglect the provinces and the needs of the new warrior

class. Beginning in 1180, Yoritomo and other Minamoto clan leaders decided to rise up against the Taira clan in Kyoto. The war between the Minamoto and the Taira lasted for five years until Minamoto armies drove the Taira from Kyoto to final defeat.

In 1185, Yoritomo established government at Kamakura, a small coastal village south of modern-day Tokyo, where the Minamoto clan had many supporters. A few years later, in 1192, Yoritomo received the title of shogun from the emperor. This made him Japan's first official shogun. The government Yoritomo founded, which lasted from 1185 until 1333, is known as the Kamakura shogunate.



Source 1 Minamoto Yoritomo went into battle for the first time at the age of 13.



Source 2 A 20th-century artist's impression of Minamoto Yoritomo parading through the streets after becoming shogun

Key achievements

Yoritomo had always wanted power and was jealous, suspicious and cold-hearted, even in his own circle. He killed several family members whom he saw as potential threats to his power. But once in power, he proved an excellent ruler.

During the war with the Taira, Yoritomo gained growing authority with the provinces of eastern Japan. He set up a system of **feudalism** with his followers, providing them with protection and land in exchange for their loyalty and military service.

After 1185, he received permission from the Imperial Court to appoint his followers to govern the provinces. They were given the job of administering and policing their provinces. They were also given the job of managing taxes and supervising individual estates. As a result, these lords held important military power over each province. They became known as *daimyo*.

Through these systems, the Kamakura shogunate undermined the power and authority of the emperor and his centralised government based in Kyoto. Before long, the Kamakura *bafuku* had replaced the Imperial Court at Kyoto as the effective central government of Japan. Yoritomo ruled from 1192 until 1199, dying of a serious illness at the age of 52, but the feudal system of government which he established remained in place for seven centuries.

Check your learning 15.6

Remember and understand

- 1 When did Minamoto Yoritomo become shogun?
- 2 How did a new warrior class emerge as a result of the emperor's approach to governing Japan?
- 3 What happened to Yoritomo after the 1159 conflict between the Minamoto clan and the Taira clan, in which his father was killed?

Apply and analyse

- 4 In your own words, explain what is meant by the term 'feudalism'. Why do you think Minamoto no Yoritomo is remembered today for establishing a feudal system in Japan?

Evaluate and create

- 5 Write a paragraph outlining the key reasons why Yoritomo was able to become so powerful.

15.7 Social groups in shogunate Japan

Although feudalism was first introduced under the rule of Minamoto no Yoritomo, it became even stronger during the Tokugawa period. Feudalism in Japan was a system for organising groups of people within society. Like the system in place across much of medieval Europe, feudalism in Japan classified social groups in order of importance. Each of these groups – from most to least important – had certain rights (things they could expect, such as protection) and responsibilities (work they had to perform in return, such as military service or farming). A person's position in this hierarchy was determined at birth and was strictly defined. People knew what was expected of them and were not able to move between social classes. There were even restrictions on the levels of interaction allowed between certain groups.

Check your learning 15.7

Remember and understand

- 1 How was the feudal system organised in Japan?
- 2 What 'rights' did each *daimyo* receive from the *shogun*, and what 'responsibilities' did he have in return?

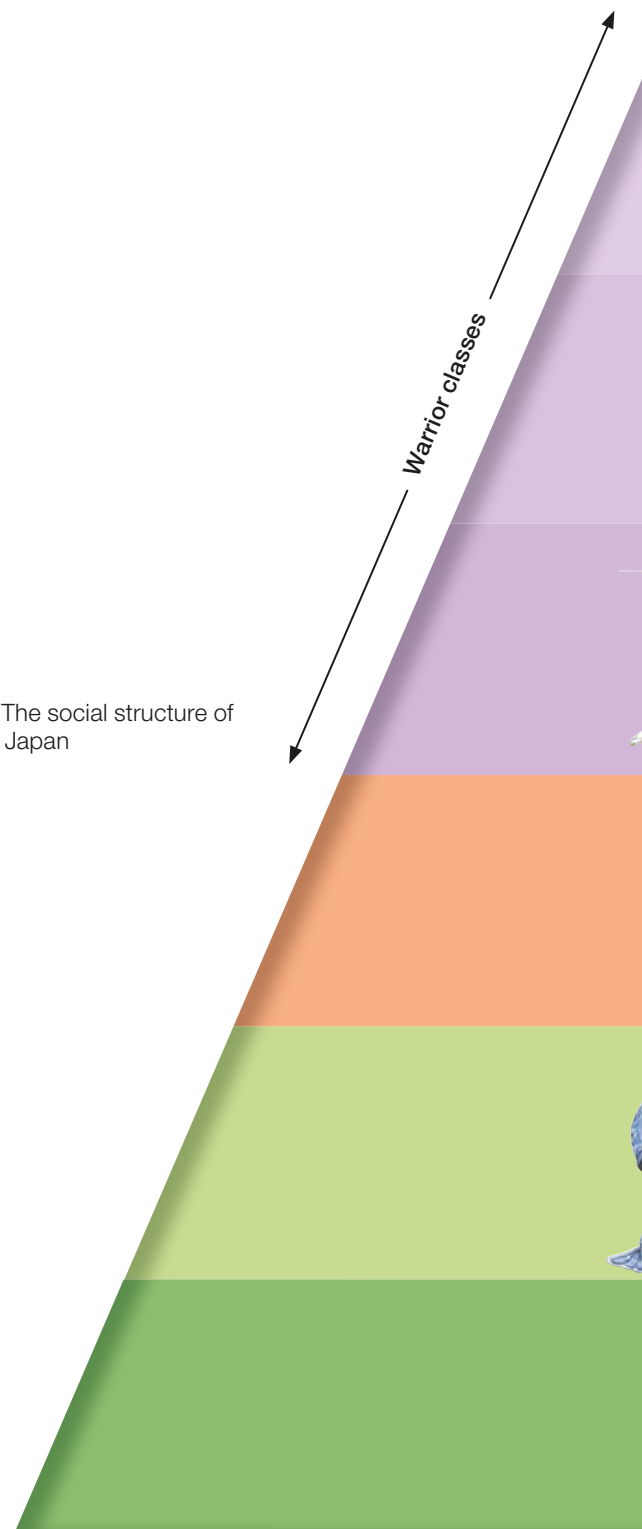
Apply and analyse

- 3 Why were Japanese craftspeople and merchants seen as being lower on the social hierarchy than peasant farmers?

Evaluate and create

- 4 Imagine you had the opportunity to interview a person from each of the social groups described in this section. Write three questions for a person in each social group that would help you to gather information about their lives and experiences as a member of that group.

Source 1 The social structure of shogunate Japan





The emperor

The emperor of Japan was regarded as the spiritual and symbolic head of the country and descended from the gods. From 1185 onwards, however, the emperor had no real power and his

role was mainly ceremonial. He was still seen as the head of state and was expected to officially give the shogun his title and right to rule. The emperor lived in the Imperial Palace in Kyoto.



The shogun

The shogun was the emperor's leading general. Between 1185 and 1867, shoguns formed their own governments and controlled Japan. As well as commanding the military, shoguns ran the everyday affairs of

the country and were responsible for collecting taxes.



Daimyo

Daimyo were regional landowners allowed to rule provinces in return for providing loyalty and military support to the shogun. While the shogun owned 25 per cent of the land, the rest of the land was

divided into 275 regions ruled by different *daimyo*. The shogun's authority depended on the loyalty of these *daimyo*. Each *daimyo* controlled a private army made up of samurai warriors that were made available to the shogun when

needed. Each *daimyo* depended on the loyalty of his samurai, together with the labour, taxes and military assistance of the peasants living in his province, in order to hold power.



Samurai

Samurai were warriors who swore allegiance and loyalty to their *daimyo*. They wore plain, dark clothes bearing a clan crest so they could be easily identified. Male samurai wore two swords denoting

their warrior status. Female samurai would also train in martial arts such as archery. (More information on samurai is provided in the next section.)



Peasants

Peasants were the largest single group in Japanese society, making up around 80 per cent of the population. Most peasants were farmers, but this group also included woodcutters, fishermen

and mine workers. Unlike European peasants, peasants in Japan were given a higher rank than merchants and craftspeople, because it was believed that they performed an essential and important role in

society – that is, producing food on which everyone depended. Despite this higher status, peasants lived a harsh life.



Craftspeople and merchants

Craftspeople were those who made goods and tools, including sword smiths, printers, boat builders and carpenters. Craftspeople received less official respect than peasants because, according to Confucian

thought, people could live without the goods they made. Merchants lived by trading and transporting goods, lending money and running shops. They were given little respect because it was considered

that they produced nothing useful themselves, only profited from the hard work of others. Merchants tended to live in the larger towns and cities and, despite their low status, they could be very wealthy.



Outcasts

At the bottom of the social ladder were two outcast groups – the *eta* and the *hinin*. The *eta* ('much filth') were involved in tasks such as butchery, leatherwork, or burials

that involved the handling of dead people or animals. The *hinin* ('non-persons') were undesirables, such as street-cleaners, ex-convicts and actors.