

Feudalism in Japan and Europe

Comparison of the Feudal Systems

Although Japan and Europe did not have any direct contact with one another during the medieval and early modern periods, they independently developed very similar socio-political systems. Often, these systems are labeled as *feudal*.

What is feudalism? The great French historian Marc Bloch defined it this way: "A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary...; supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man...; [and] fragmentation of authority - leading inevitably to disorder."

In other words, there are peasants who are tied to the farm land and work for protection plus a portion of the harvest, rather than for money. Warriors dominate the society and are bound by codes of obedience and ethics. Finally, there is no strong central government; instead, lords of smaller units of land control the warriors and peasants, but these lords owe (at least theoretical) obedience to a distant and relatively weak duke, king or emperor.

Similarities between Japanese and European Feudalism

Feudal Japanese and European societies were built on a system of hereditary classes. The nobles were at the top, followed by warriors, with tenant farmers or serfs below.



There was very little social mobility; the children of farmers became farmers, while the children of lords became lords and ladies. (One prominent exception to this rule in Japan was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, born a farmer's son, who rose to rule over the country.)

In both feudal Japan and Europe, constant warfare made warriors the most important class. Called "knights" in Europe and "samurai" in Japan, the warriors served local lords.

In both cases, the warriors were bound by a code of ethics. Knights were supposed to hew to the concept of *chivalry*, while samurai were bound by the precepts of *bushido*, or "the Way of the Warrior."

Both knights and samurai rode horses into battle, used swords, and wore armor. European armor was usually all-metal, made of chain mail or plate metal. Japanese armor included laquered leather or metal

plates and silk or metal bindings. European knights were almost immobilized by their armor, needing help up on to their horses, from where they would simply try to knock their opponents off their mounts.

Samurai, in contrast, went with light-weight armor that allowed them quickness and maneuverability, at the cost of providing much less protection.

Feudal lords in Europe built stone castles to protect themselves and their vassals in case of attack. Japanese daimyo also built castles, although Japan's castles were made of wood rather than stone.

Differences between Japanese and European Feudalism

Japanese feudalism was based on the ideas of the Chinese philosopher Kong Qiu or Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius stressed morality and filial piety, or respect for elders and other superiors. In Japan, this functioned as the moral duty of daimyo and samurai to protect the peasants and villagers in their region, and the duty of the peasants and villagers to honor the warriors and pay taxes to them in return.

European feudalism was based instead on Roman Imperial laws and customs, supplemented with Germanic traditions, and supported by the authority of the Catholic Church. The relationship between a lord and his vassals was seen as contractual; lords offered payment and protection, in return for which vassals offered complete loyalty. It is interesting that these two very different legal/moral systems ended up creating such similar socio-political structures.

Another difference between these two feudal systems is their timing. Feudalism was well-established in Europe by the 800s CE, but appeared in Japan only in the 1100s as the Heian period drew to a close and the Kamakura Shogunate rose to power. European feudalism died out with the growth of stronger political states in the sixteenth century, but Japanese feudalism held on until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

A key distinguishing factor between the two is land-ownership. European knights gained land from their lords as payment for their military service; they thus had direct control of the serfs who worked that land. In contrast, Japanese samurai did not own any land. Instead, the daimyo used a portion of their income from taxing the peasants to pay the samurai a salary, usually paid in rice.

Samurai and knights differed in several other ways, including their gender interactions. Samurai women, for example, were expected to be strong like the men, and to face death without flinching. European women were considered fragile flowers who had to be protected by chivalrous knights. In addition, samurai were supposed to be cultured and artistic, able to compose poetry or write in beautiful calligraphy. Knights were usually illiterate, and would likely have scorned such past-times in favor of hunting or jousting.

Finally, knights and samurai had very different approaches to death. Knights were bound by Catholic Christian law against suicide, and strove to avoid death. Samurai, on the other hand, had no religious reason to avoid death, and would commit suicide in the face of defeat in order to maintain their honor. This ritual suicide is known as seppuku (or "harikiri").

