

The Samurai of Japan and European Knights



Japanese and European medieval societies developed along similar feudal lines and in both, a warrior elite emerged as the dominant force. In both parts of the world, honour played an important part in their cultures, and knights and samurai were expected to follow their respective warrior codes, the 'Chivalric Code' in Europe and 'Bushido' (way of the warrior) in Japan.

The codes were not set in stone, they differed from one clan or country to the next and changed down the ages; however, there were several key factors in each that tended to be considered essential parts of the way a warrior should conduct his life.

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In both Europe and Japan throughout the Middle Ages, the sword was considered the most noble weapon and would contain spiritual significance to the warrior. The samurai famously believed that the legendary samurai sword contained its owner's soul, and according to Richard Cohen in his book, 'By the Sword', the same sort of importance was put on the medieval knight's sword, which was believed to possess the essence of the warrior's inner power and true nobility.

One of the main influences for this tradition in Europe was the poem 'Beowulf', whose sword 'Hrunting' would not allow its user to perform evil acts. Before battle, a knight would kiss the cross of his sword on the hilt in an act of religious significance made more so as this part of the sword often contained relics.

Warriors from both regions had similar ideas about how a battle should be fought and it was generally agreed that charging into an enemy, then engaging in one-on-one combat was the noblest way to fight. Although both preferred to fight in a 'gentlemanly' manner, this probably happened much more in fictitious accounts of warfare than on the real battlefield as the realities of war usually would not allow for formalities. Stephen Turnbull highlights a case of this in his book, 'The Samurai: A Military History'.

During the 'Gempei War' (1180–1185), in the 'Battle of Kurikara', part of the Minamoto force engaged their vastly more powerful enemy, the Taira Clan, in a battle that was conducted in a formal and gentlemanly way. They started with an archery duel, followed by combat between small groups fighting one-on-one and then a pitched battle between one hundred warriors from each side. But the Minamoto had been keeping their enemy occupied and soon the realities of war returned. The Minamoto charged a herd of oxen with flaming pine torches attached to their horns into the Taira, driving them into a valley where they were trapped and subsequently slaughtered. The chronicle 'Heike Monogatari' states:

"Thus did seventy thousand horsemen of the Taira perish, buried in this one deep valley; the mountain streams ran with their blood and the mound of their corpses was like a small hill; and in this valley, it is said, there can be seen the marks of arrow and swords even to this day."

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Both these codes helped to shape the ideals and values of their people. However, both often differed considerably in what they deemed honourable, suggesting that the definition of the word 'honour' changed to suit the needs of the people involved in a given time and place. To the medieval knight, a defeated enemy of high social rank was to be captured and ransomed when possible but those of low birth could be slaughtered.

To the Japanese, warriors were in battle to die and would be killed without mercy, whereas peasants were not warriors so there was no honour in taking their lives. To take an opposing warrior captive would be to take his honour from him so rather than be taken prisoner, a samurai would take his own life in a ritual known as 'Seppuku', an action that would not only lead to dishonour for the European Christian knight, but also to eternal damnation.

Questions 1–7

Complete the sentences below.

*Choose **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** from the passage for each answer.*

1. Both Japanese samurai and medieval knights valued the importance of _____.
2. The sword in both Japan and Europe was said to be a _____.
3. Knights would _____ their sword before going into battle.
4. The idea of fighting like a gentleman was probably more _____ than real.
5. The Minamoto slaughtered _____ during the Gempei War.
6. The meaning of honour for both the samurai and European knights _____.
7. A samurai would rather commit _____ than be captured by the enemy.

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