

The Rise of the Samurai

When the word samurai is heard many different things are associated with it. Honor, respect, power, and of course the most common thing associated with the samurai, the katana. Many of these things are indeed true of some samurai throughout history, but most samurai did not possess each of these traits at the same time. Through the nearly thousand-year history of the samurai they have evolved from being basically mercenaries for hire, to power hungry warlords fighting for land, and eventually into something much more similar to how they are viewed today. In Japan during the Heian Period(710-1185AD) the government attempted to reform the taxation of the lands, but this only ended up leaving many farmers in poverty and being forced to sell their lands and become tenants of wealthy land owners. The government became weakened during this time and were unable to protect the private lands of these wealthy land owners, so these land owners would hire their own militia to defend their lands. This was the beginning of the samurai.

In the film, "*Sansho the Bailiff*" we get a glimpse of what life was like for some unfortunate people enslaved to a wealthy land owner, and the samurai that worked for him. The samurai working for Shansho, the land owner, while loyal to their lord and enforcing the rules of his land, don't seem very honorable. Their main function to Sansho is to ensure his slaves aren't being lazy and making sure none of them run away. Anyone they catch trying to run away is severely punished by being branded on their face. When the main character of the film manages to acquire the Governor position over the land in which Sansho's land is located, he is informed that Sansho's land is a private property in which the government has no power. This shows the kind of power and influence that the wealthy held over the government during this time.

The primary form of payment for these early samurai was in the form of lands. Over the next few centuries, the samurai would begin to build and establish large clans and families focused purely on training to be soldiers. The primary weapon of the samurai during this time was the yumi, or bow and arrow. Over the centuries, they would incorporate naginata, which are similar to pike or spear type weapons, the iconic katana that many currently associate with the word samurai, and surprisingly firearms. Two families would emerge from the many that formed to become the most well-known and strongest. Those families were the Minamoto family, and the Taira family, also known as the Genji clan and Heike clan respectively. According to the History Channel special, “The Samurai”, there would be times when a samurai family would attempt to overthrow the government, but the Minamoto family was loyal to the government and would be called upon to defend them from these attacks. The Taira family however managed to defeat the Minamoto family and claimed control of the government. Taira Kiyomori, the leader of the Taira family during that time wanted to kill off all the children of the Minamoto family’s leader, but was convinced to let some of them live. This would prove to be a serious mistake.

In the book by Hiroaki Sato, “Legends of the Samurai”, one of the stories within is called “Minamoto no Yoshitsune: A Hero Hounded”. This story tells of how the half-brothers Yoritomo and Yoshitsune of the Minamoto family rose back up to destroy the Taira family. During Taira Kiyomori’s rule many became displeased with how he handled the government, because of this when the Minamoto families began consolidating their forces, many joined their side. This overwhelming force forced the Taira family out of the capital and chased them all the way to the west end of Japan where they were finally defeated in the Battle of Dan-no-ura. This battle is colorfully described in “The Tale of the Heike”, part of which is told in the film “Kwaidan”. Minamoto Yoritomo, afraid his half-brother Yoshitsune, would attempt to take his position as

head of the Minamoto family, had him killed, as well as other close family members that he felt threatened by and established a new militarized government, and was appointed to the position of Shogun.

Through these different documentaries, films, and tales, we can see how the samurai began as simple mercenaries, working for whomever paid the best wage. Used the wealth and land they acquired over the centuries to establish powerful military families. Fought each other for control of the land and government. Crushed anyone that could be a threat to their power. Samurai, while at times were honorable, respectful, and powerful, were still just as greedy or selfish when it suited them. The samurai would fight each other for power and control of Japan for many centuries before becoming united and in a time of peace, evolve into the modern day image associated with the word samurai.