THE MILITARY HISTORY OF JAPAN

(Up to the Tokugawa period)

Since the large-scale introduction of Japanese martial arts in the middle of the previous century, the knowledge of the Japanese martial tradition has increased considerably. Pioneers like the late Donn Dreager have clarified much about the development of fighting methods and the organization of these in the many *ryû*. However, this early research into the martial history of Japan was partly based on the classical war tales like Heike Monogatari, and sometimes contained misconceptions about the nature of the warrior class, its ideas and moral or the methods of warfare. These errors have been adopted as facts by a whole generation of budo authors and have thus become common property in the world of budo. In recent years much sound research has been published in English by people like Conlan, Friday and Hurst that can adjust our views on the martial history of Japan. Below I will try to give a concise overview of the developments the Japanese warrior class through the ages has gone through and the changes in the methods of warfare and the use of weapons that were connected with these changes.

The early empire

Hardly any remains have been found in Japan of an equestrian culture older than the 5th century A.D. From this time onward, a large distribution has taken place of the horse and its military applications. Opinions vary whether this can be contributed to an importation of horses and military technology (iron weapons and armor) from the mainland, or that a mounted people invaded Japan from the Korean peninsula. Whatever the cause, this rapid spreading of an equestrian culture coincided with the rise of the first centralized state of Japan Yamato. This state was not only based on ritual, trade and foreign relations, but also on the skill in mounted warfare of the ruling clan. The central role that the horse played in this period can be seen from the *haniwa* statues of mounted, armored warriors that have been unearthed. During the Nara and Heian periods, the ruling class developed a sophisticated court culture that moved away from the old martial culture of Yamato. Inspired by Chinese example, a system of compulsory military service was introduced and conscripts were organized by the Ministry of Military Affairs (*Hyôbunshô*) into provincial regiments (*gundan*), led by officers from the lower court nobility and provincial elite. This was not a standing army, but consisted of militia units that could be raised in case of emergency. Next to guard and police duties in their own province, these units were charged with guarding the capital, fighting the *emishi* in the north and protecting the country against a possible invasion from the Chinese mainland. The armament mainly consisted of bow, (straight) sword and *hoko* (pole-weapon with socketed spearhead).

Rise of the *bushi*

The cavalry units that were part of the regiments of the national army were manned by members of the provincial elite, who were already experienced with horseback riding and martial skills. The place these units of mounted archers occupied in military matters would become more important during the 8th century. A decrease in the threat from the continent and the border areas in the north resulted in 792 in the dissolving of the conscript regiments, after which small military units for specific tasks would be recruited from the group of martially capable lower court nobility and provincial dignitaries. In this way, networks of professional warriors came up during the Heian period that, in exchange for titles from the court, placed their private military skills and means in the service of the political establishment by executing police and guard duties. During the Gempei war (1180-1185), the ever growing organization of these networks of *bushi* would culminate in the epic fight between the two large warrior families that were connected to court circles Taira and Minamoto and, as a final result, in the establishment of the first warrior government (*bakufu*) in 1192 under *shôgun* Minamoto no Yoritomo. That this was not, as is often suggested, a feud between two family clans, but between two *bushi* networks, becomes clear from the fact that members of the Minamoto

were fighting on the side of the Taira and vice versa. Also the widely held view that the *bushi* took over the power of the court, should be modified; during the whole of the Heian period warriors rendered their services to obtain status and positions within court circles and also during the time of the Kamakura-*bakufu*, court and nobility remained a power to be reckoned with.

War in early medieval Japan

In the Heian period war was waged on a small scale, between groups of dozens or hundreds of warriors. During the Gempei war however, the size of the nationwide *bushi* networks of the Taira and Minamoto caused an increase in the scale of warfare. But the composition of the early medieval warrior class still dictated how armies were assembled an how they fought. The *bushi*, also known as *gokenin* ('honorable houseman', used for the direct vassals of the *bakufu*) or *buke* ('martial house'), were landowners who would go to war accompanied by a small band of subordinate followers from their estate. Armies of the Kamakura era consisted of many of these small, autonomous groups, brought together by a leader who maintained personal ties with the *gokenin*. The armies were assembled for the duration of a certain campaign and a *bushi* could choose to leave the battlefield if he wanted (for example to take care of his farmlands). As the campaigns usually took a limited amount of time, there was no opportunity for the warriors to train together, making a disciplined cooperation on the battlefield impossible.

In medieval Japan, the conquest of lands or hostage-taking for ransom, as was customary in Europe, was unknown. The purpose of warfare was to make it difficult for the opponent to continue to fight, by destroying their livelihood or by killing their followers. A warrior could distinguish himself for reward with valiant behavior like being the first in contact with the enemy, or by killing ranking opponents (and bringing the head as evidence). In battle no distinction was made between warriors and civilians like women, children or clergymen. Ambushes and night attacks were not seen as dishonorable. In a situation where mobile mounted units could easily avoid an encounter when they were outnumbered, these tactics were even considered smart and necessary forms of combat. That the medieval *bushi* was an honorable warrior who on the battlefield recited his pedigree of many generations, to subsequently seek out a worthy opponent for a personal duel, is an image that should be adjusted.

Fighting techniques in the early Middle Ages

The way of fighting of the classical *bushi* is known as the Way of the bow and horse (*kyûba no michi*) or the Way of bow and arrow (*yumiya nog michi*). The fact that this shows little similarity with the nomadic traditions of the Asian continent is based on typical Japanese elements. The horses that were available to the *bushi* were relatively small (with an average height of 130cm at the shoulder) and unshod, which meant that, ridden by an armored warrior, they could only canter for a short period of time before dropping into a trot and they would get fatigued quickly. But they were well suited for rough or mountainous terrain and their smooth pace allowed for accurate archery. An oddity is that stallions were not gelded, which must have caused many problems when many horses were brought together during campaigns. The saddle consisted of a box-like structure, placed on a leather under-saddle. They were time-consuming to place and uncomfortable for mount and horseman, but they offered a stable platform for archery. Upright boards at the front and the back protected the lower torso of the rider and offered a support for the warrior's armor. This armor, called *ôyoroi*, was a loose, box-like construction designed to protect against arrows, but because of its poor balance and heavy weight (which, without saddle support, was completely suspended from the shoulders), it was not well suited for fighting in dismounted position. For accompanying retainers an adapted version of armor called *haramaki* was therefore soon developed that was suitable for fighting on foot. The relative weakness of the Japanese bow and the good protection offered by the *ôyoroi* made it necessary for *bushi* to approach each other to short distance, in an attempt to hit unprotected areas like neck, face and armpits. Since mounted archers were also limited in the shooting direction, this resulted in a battlefield full of warriors maneuvering around to get a shot at each other; as Friday puts it, not unlike

aviation dogfights. Because of the emphasis on mounted archery, battles were very mobile; barricades and fortifications were erected for the duration of a fight, but were hardly ever permanent structures. Getting into close-quarter fights with swords or knives was a risky affair for warrior or horse and was avoided when possible. The unwillingness of *bushi* to risk their own life or that of their precious mount kept casualty rates of the early medieval era generally low. Research of written sources of the time (Conlan 2003) has shown that most of the wounds were caused by arrows, while a much smaller amount can be contributed to swords, *naginata* or rocks. The almost complete absence of spear wounds tells us that this weapon was hardly used during this period.
Also taking part in the fighting were combatants on foot, often called *nôbushi*. These could be nameless followers of the mounted *bushi*, but also ranking warriors who fought as archers on foot, mingling with the (slow) horse-riders or hiding in bushes, on top of buildings or behind movable, wooden shields. Weapons that were often used by foot soldiers, were the *naginata*, *masakari* (battle axe), *kumade* (bear claw) and the long sword. This last one was called *ôdachi* (big sword) or *nodachi* (field sword). In order to be better able to wield this heavy weapon, the blunt part of the blade was often wound with chord, which eventually resulted in the development of the *nagamaki*, a version of *naginata* with a long blade and an equally long, wound shaft. The *kumade* was a rake-like instrument attached to pole that was used in sieges and naval warfare, but also to pull mounted warriors from their saddles. In early medieval warfare, the sword played a very minor role and should mainly be seen as a back-up weapon for situations where the main weapon was lost.

Threat from abroad
In the second half of the 13th century the Kamakura-*bakufu*, by now dominated by the Hôjô family, received envoys from the Mongol Yuan-dynasty demanding tribute. The refusal of the warrior government resulted in 1274 in the first landing of a Mongol invasion force in Hataka Bay in Kyushu. In this attack the *bushi* were confronted with fighting methods hitherto unknown to them. The Mongols operated in closed, disciplined groups and they were not impressed by the individualistic and at times ritualistic way of fighting of their Japanese counterparts. The Mongol use of war drums and explosives shocked the *bushi* and their horses. Recent research by Conlan (2001) has shown however, that the warriors must have been capable of putting up a strong resistance; both Mongol and Japanese sources mention the prowess of the Japanese archers. Lack of manpower prevented the Mongols from effectively occupying territory and Japanese counterattacks forced the invaders to retreat to their ships. But in written sources of the time no references can be found of the typhoon that supposedly wrecked their fleet, other than there being a moderate, offshore wind. It may therefore be concluded that the disappearance of the Mongols was actually a planned retreat, making use of the right weather to sail back to the mainland. The second invasion of 1281 with its two coordinated forces (the Korean fleet from the north and the Chinese Sung navy from the south) was of a larger scale, but even less successful. The Japanese had learned from the 1274 invasion and had built protective walls along the coast of North West Kyushu at all beaches that were suitable for landings, which made it impossible for the Mongol units to disembark. During a campaign of six weeks, the Mongols only succeeded in capturing a few islands before the coast. The *bushi* brought the fight to them by attacking the Mongol ships with little boats under cover of darkness, using their swords and n*aginata*, causing many casualties on the side of the invaders. The fortified walls and the stiff resistance of the Japanese was cause of the fact that the entire Mongol invasion force was on board their ships anchored at sea outside of the protecting bays when this time a typhoon struck and destroyed the fleet.

Domestic developments
Although the *bakufu* had emerged as the victor, keeping their forces mobilized for years, together with the costly battles caused expenses that could not be recovered from the defeated enemy. This weakened the warrior government so much that it was eventually overthrown. The ensuing power struggle was decided in 1338 by Ashikaga Takauji with the establishment of the Muromachi-*bakufu*. A conflict with emperor Go-Daigo resulted in the

flight of the latter to the mountain village Yoshino, located South of the capital, where he set up a court that competed with the one in Kyoto. This Nanbokucho period ('Era of Northern and Southern Court') would keep the country at war for 50 years. The instability during the Muromachi period was further increased by the fact that some of the Ashikaga shoguns were weak leaders that could easily be influenced by powerful families in the provinces. These families had come to power during the Kamakura era as *shugo* ('protectors'), appointed by the shogun to supervise its vassals in a province. In order to finance the war against the Southern Court, the Muromachi-*bakufu* granted her *shugo* (the office of whom over the course of time had become hereditary within certain families) far-reaching powers for tax collection. They were allowed to use half of the revenue of their territory on military expenses and this income allowed them to build up their own power base in their province, to form their own *bushi* networks and eventually to raise their own armies. In this way they became territorial lords known as *shugo-daimyo* ('protector – big name'). Two of these powerful families are at the basis of the Onin war (1467-1477). The cause of this conflict was a disagreement over the succession of an Ashikaga shogun, both sides supporting another candidate. Large armies clashed in the capital, until this was reduced to smoldering rubble; the fight got bogged down in years of trench warfare and it sparked off conflict all over the country. The Onin war would become the impetus to the Sengoku Jidai ('Period of Warring States'), which would keep the country at war for more than a century. During this all-embracing power struggle many of the old *shugo-daimyo* lost their positions and the *sengoku-daimyo* emerged; a new kind of leader that exploited his territory to the fullest extend in the service of constant warfare.

Developments in warfare

The experience with the new fighting methods of the Mongols had hardly changed the tactics of the *bushi*; conflicts of the beginning of the 14th century were still fought in very much the same way as before. But during the war between *bakufu* and Southern Court the fighting in many cases took place on locations that were less accessible to horses, like wooded and mountainous areas. Also, fortifications (although still made out of wood and earth) were used more often and for longer periods of time. The result of these changes was that *bushi* were often forced to dismount and fight on foot, which spurred new developments in armor and the use of weapons. The bow remained dominant, but the individual shots that were common among the mounted *bushi* were replaced by follies of arrows, shot by archers on foot; an increase in close-quarter combat furthermore caused a higher rate of sword wounds. Halfway in the 15th century an important development became noticeable with the rise of the spear. It was first used in closed units by the Hatakeyama during internal fighting within this clan, but by the end of the Onin war the spear was widely in use by all sides. During this devastating war all *shugo* who were present in Kyoto joined one of the two belligerent parties, until two huge armies opposed each other. Apart from the *bushi*, a new breed of fighting men took part in this conflict. The *ashigaru* ('light feet', because of the lack of armor) were initially untrained, landless farmers who were drawn by the prospect of loot. The *daimyo* had fortified their mansions, thereby roughly dividing the capital in a Western and Eastern zone. During the first days of the war large parts of Kyoto were burned down to make room for roaming horsemen. It became clear however that important tactical changes were eminent, when during an attack of the Western army their cavalry unit was stopped and driven back by a smaller force of the Hatakayama-clan, using spears. The pikemen approached behind wooden shields before they ran from a short distance into the horsemen, causing heavy casualties. This moment was nothing less than a turning point in Japanese warfare; before it was dominated by mobile units that could always evade each other, but now it was possible for the first time to enter a territory and occupy it with pikemen. But in order to deploy this kind of units effectively, time was needed for joint exercises. Their stronger financial positions allowed the *shugo-daimyo* for the first time to raise standing units and to let them train together. In this way armies professionalized and the focus shifted from offensive to defensive action. Due to these defensive tactics the Onin war settled down in years of trench warfare, effectively cutting the capital in half with systems of trenches, flanked by guard towers. *Ashigaru* were used in night attacks against enemy fortifications and the cavalry, unfit for this

kind of warfare, was deployed in the rear as scouts or to disrupt supply lines. By the end of the war all parties made use of large units of pikemen, which in turn stimulated the building of more permanent fortifications.

Sengoku Jidai

Because of the stalemate in the capital, the violence spread into the rest of Japan; the conflict was used as an excuse to settle differences in the provinces as *shugo-daimyo* were overthrown by dissatisfied vassals. The era of the Warring States had begun. During this period the political landscape of Japan altered enormously. The influence of emperor and court became marginalized and old *shugo* houses disappeared from the scene. They were succeeded by a new kind of daimyo who compensated his low birth by competent leadership. This phenomenon, in which the *sengoku-daimyo* supplant the earlier *shugo-daimyo* became known as *gekokujo* ('the lower conquering the higher'). These new leaders lived in a world without central authority, in which everyone was at war with everyone. In order to optimize their military power they endeavored to enlarge the revenue of their domain by implementing numerous innovations in agriculture, trade and other areas. Land surveys, taxes and military services were all used to maintain a powerful military force. The way of leading such large armies had also changed. In the early Middle Ages the main task of a commander was to recruit warriors to his cause, to subsequently let them fight in very much an independent fashion. But by now leaders were actually leading their armies; they had to convince their warriors to follow orders and be subordinate to the greater cause. Charismatic commanders emerged who, dressed in flamboyant armor, became the symbolic center of their army. The way the different *daimyo* mobilized their forces and the proportion of the different weapons within their units could differ greatly. This would eventually decide who would emerge as the most successful players.

The introduction of firearms

The image that many have of warfare during the Sengoku period, is the scene from Kurosawa's film *Kagemusha*, in which the cavalry units of the Takeda were wiped away by the musket follies of Oda Nobunaga's gunners who were entrenched behind barricades. The scene is symbolic for the sad end of the mounted *bushi*, who was no match for large numbers of foot soldiers armed with guns. The actual battle at Nagashino took place in a totally different manner however and the role that was played by firearms was, as in most of the other battles of the Sengoku period, a lot less decisive. One important effect of the use of muskets that can be noticed in this battle however, was that the Takeda lost a relatively large number of their officers, due to the fact that these attracted a lot of the gunfire with their recognizable armor.

The year 1543 is usually considered as the date of introduction of firearms in Japan, when Portuguese traders landed on the Southern island Tanegashima and on that occasion sold a few harquebuses to the local *daimyo* of the Shimazu-clan. More primitive guns had been introduced earlier from China however, but because of their limited effectiveness they had never become popular. This new weapon on the other hand spread very quickly throughout the Japanese islands; the Ashikaga shoguns, who had received some copies of the Shimazu, gave the harquebuses and recipes for gunpowder to the *daimyo* who supported them. The access to firearms made it easier for these warlords, who were mostly situated in the Western half of Japan, to maintain their territories in the long run. One of the most important centers of gun production was the Negoroji south of Kyoto, which also made it possible for this temple complex to raise a strong army.

The experienced Japanese blacksmiths were soon able to reproduce high quality guns, including the difficult process of rifling them to make them more accurate, although in the beginning effective deployment remained limited by a scarcity of lead (bullets) and saltpetre (gunpowder). Next to handguns the Europeans also introduced different kinds of canon in Japan, from small calibre breech-loading swivel guns used on ships (the so called *furanki*), to large canon able to shoot heavy projectiles (the *taihô*). There were limitations to the use of artillery however. Their heavy weight made them difficult to transport for field campaigns and large quantities of precious powder were needed to fire them. Therefore canon were mainly

used against fortifications, which in turn gave rise to huge innovations in the building of castles. Fortifications had almost always been built of wood, with moats and earthen defense walls, but at the end of the Sengoku period, walls were mainly made of stone. Castles also spread over much larger areas to prevent the possibility of targeting the main keep with canon (currently, no castle remains in Japan with an intact outer wall. Even of the famous Himeji castle only the inner and second ring remain). A good example of the importance of artillery in attacking fortifications can be seen during the siege in 1615 of the castle of Toyotomi Hideyori. The Tokugawa gunners succeeded in hitting the main keep (containing the living quarters of Hideyori's family) with their long range guns, thereby forcing the Toyotomi side into an armistice. Ieyasu subsequently used the truce to fill up the outer moat. When hostilities were resumed half a year later, it was possible to take the castle.

Fighting in the Sengoku period

The advantage of firearms over bow and arrow were for a long time unclear. They were heavy, expensive to make and slow in reloading. A musket had an effective range of about 100m, but was accurate up to 50m and could pierce armor up to 30m. This last feat was only possible with bow and arrow up to around 12m but the shooting speed of the latter weapon was considerably higher. With the passing of time the production of muskets increased and better gunpowder became available, but it would still take until 1600 for guns to dominate the battlefield. At that time 80% of the wounds caused by projectile weapons were due to musket fire. In the preceding decades a far larger part of the wounds can be attributed to arrows. On the battlefield, bow and musket were used together, usually in combination with pikemen. The spears they used (the *nagae yari*, or long-shafted spear) became longer, until they reached an average length of 5.5m (in the units of Oda Nobunaga even longer spears of over 8m were used), thus increasing the average fighting distance.

In the course of a hundred years, huge changes had occurred in the composition of armies. During the Onin war halfway the 15th century, *ashigaru* had arrived on the scene as auxiliary troops armed with shock-weapons, but by the first half of the 16th century they had been transformed into sizable units of well-trained soldiers who occupied the front ranks of armies with lances, bows and (from around 1550 onward) muskets. The mounted *bushi*, who had traditionally occupied this place, were delegated to a less glorious position. The new way of deployment of *ashigaru* greatly influenced the manner in which cavalry was used. In earlier times the main weapon of mounted *bushi* was the bow used in individual encounters, but this proved ineffective against large units armed with spears and projectile weapons. In the beginning of the 16th century a change occurred in cavalry tactics in which the bow became supplanted by the spear. The *bushi* were now used as mounted spearmen that entered the fighting after the *ashigaru* had made the first contact with the enemy; they took the fight to their adversaries in a cavalry charge or after having dismounted. The significance of the spear as the new main weapon of the *bushi* becomes clear in the tradition of calling the bravest warriors of a certain battle by the expression *shichi hon yari*, or 'Seven Spears'. The most famous example of this custom is probably the *Shizugatake no shichihon yari*, the 'Seven Spears of the Shizugatake Battle'.

Bakufu* and *samurai

Following the establishment of the *bakufu* and the neutralization of their last rival Toyotomi Hideyori, the Tokugawa endeavored to centralize military means as much as possible. Production of muskets and canon by other *daimyo* was discouraged and would eventually be totally controlled by the *bakufu*. Martial training was kept up in the domains, but by now the world of the *bushi* had changed considerably. After unifying the country, the predecessor of Tokugawa Ieyasu, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, had stipulated in his sword hunting decree of 1588 that all farmers had to hand in their weapons. This command would have immense consequences for the *bushi*, who hitherto had been both warriors and landowners, connected to a certain area. The decree forced them to either hand in their weapons and become farmers, or become a member of the class of the *samurai* ('one who serves'), as salaried professional soldiers housed in the barracks of their *daimyo*, thus separating the *bushi* from their ancestral homelands. This edict was to become the foundation of the feudal society of

the Edo period in which *samurai* constituted the highest of four classes (the others being farmers, artisans and merchants). With a following decree in 1591 prohibiting all changes in status between these classes, the 'separation of warriors and farmers' (*hei-nô bunri*) was a fact.
With the wars of the Sengoku period still fresh in their memory, the *samurai* spent the first half of the 17th century training hard for the expected resumption of hostilities, but when time progressed and the peace became more stable, the *samurai* started to change. Most of the warriors lived in the capitals of their domains or in Edo, the center of the *bakufu*, where they performed administrative duties. Under the influence of Tokugawa era neo-confucianism, *Bushido* was formulated in which the ideals of the classical warriors were idealized, but in the meantime practice in the martial arts fell into disuse. The only martial tradition that was still kept up by many *samurai*, was sword training, the sword having gained in importance as the symbol of the ruling warrior class. But eventually the pleasures of city life would draw away many of the warriors, by now turned into bureaucrats, from even this last remainder of martial valor.

Conclusion
Although with many the word *samurai* evokes a well-defined image, it has become clear that the Japanese warrior has gone through huge changes in the course of history. When the conscript regiments were abolished at the end of the Heian period, the provincial elite succeeded in gradually developing itself into a warrior class, which would eventually dominate the country. The members of this group cherished their freedom and endeavored, in ever changing loyalties, to improve their position. They were mounted archers, assisted by small bands of followers on foot armed with bow, *naginata* or *nodachi*. When provincial leaders got access the means to raise armies, the role of the foot soldiers of low birth increased. These were deployed in units of pikemen and later also as missile troops armed with bow or musket. Although firearms gained in importance during the latter half of the 16th century, it would take until 1600 before they would dominate the battlefield. As a consequence of these developments, the *bushi* changed from mounted archers in spear wielding cavalry. During the uncertain times of the Sengoku period, it became increasingly difficult for *bushi* to maintain their independence and they became more and more under control of the *daimyo* of their territory.
With the establishment of the Tokugawa-*bakufu* a long period of peace commenced, in which the benefits of martial training faded to the background and *samurai* focused on sword practice. Although during times of war the sword had never been anything other than a back-up weapon for close-quarter defense, the fact that the wearing of two swords (*daisho*) was reserved for the samurai class, contributed to the identification of the sword with the Japanese warrior.
But the changes go much further than the way battles were waged. The *bushi* of the Kamakura era were proud and independent landowners connected to their ancestral region. Their main drive was to improve the position of their house. Their power was based on their ability with horse and bow and they used all the tricks in the book to gain an upper hand. Over the course of six hundred years since the establishment of the Kamakura-*bakufu* the warrior had turned into a totally different person. As a civil servant in the administration of the Tokugawa-*bakufu*, the *samurai* generally had little knowledge of other weapons than his sword, let alone experience with horses. He was a city-dweller without land and was totally dependent on his lord for income. It was therefore only logical that the *Bushido* that emerged during this period advocated a deep loyalty towards one's lord and a willingness to die for him.

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(Frank Reemer)