

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this volume is medieval Japan, spanning the three and a half centuries between the final decades of the twelfth century when the Kamakura bakufu was founded and the mid-sixteenth century during which civil wars raged following the effective demise of the Muromachi bakufu.¹ The historical events and developments of these colorful centuries depict medieval Japan's polity, economy, society, and culture, as well as its relations with its Asian neighbors. The major events and the most significant developments are not difficult to summarize.

This was the period of warriors. Throughout these centuries, the power of the warrior class continued to rise, and one political result of this development was the formation of two warrior governments, or bakufu. The first, the Kamakura bakufu, founded in the 1180s, was not able to govern the nation single-handedly. In several important respects, it had to share power with the civil authority of the *tennō* – usually translated as the emperor² – and the court. But under the second warrior government – the Ashikaga bakufu that came into being in 1336 and was firmly established by the end of the fourteenth century – the warrior class was able to erode the power of the civil authority. During the first half of the fifteenth century, when the bakufu's power was at its zenith, the warrior class governed the nation in substantive ways. Although the civil authority did not lose all its power and continued to help legitimize the bakufu, it was manipulated and used to serve the bakufu's own political needs almost at will.

The demise of the Kamakura bakufu in 1333 and the beginning of the effective end of the Ashikaga bakufu in the late fifteenth century came about because of political and military challenges to the bakufu's

1 Although this volume on medieval Japan deals primarily with the Kamakura and Muromachi periods as dated by most Western scholars, when the period began and ended continues to be debated among Japanese specialists. For a succinct discussion of the debate among Japanese scholars, see Hall (1983), pp. 5–8.

2 An accurate translation of *tennō* is neither “king” nor “emperor,” especially as applied to the *tennō* of the medieval period. However, because “emperor” has become an accepted translation, the term is used interchangeably with *tennō* in this volume.

power from within the warrior class. The third and last bakufu in Japanese history, the Tokugawa bakufu, took power in 1600 by unifying the regional warrior powers that had rendered the Ashikaga bakufu powerless and engaged in a century of internal warfare. The establishment of the Tokugawa bakufu, with a 267-year history that could be written with little reference to the civil authority, was the culmination of the warrior power that had first built the Kamakura bakufu nearly 500 years earlier.

Paralleling the continuing rise of the warriors' power was the gradual transformation of the *shōen* – Japan's counterpart to the medieval manors of Europe – and public land into fiefs. *Shōen* were first created in the eighth century from privatized public land, and they had become, by the twelfth century, the principal source of private wealth and income for the emperor himself, nobles, and temples. Along with local and regional officers of the civil government and others, many warriors too played a role in the process of privatization. They either opened new paddies, mostly by reclaiming unused land, or managed to exert their power over nearby public paddies. They then commended these paddies to nobles and temples, which were able to obtain legal grants of immunity from the dues imposed on the paddies. This process gradually reduced the income of the civil government, although it benefited the nobles and temples that shared the income from the paddies with the warriors who commended them. The warriors also increased their income by usurping, in various ways, rights to income from the *shōen* as well as from the public land that continued to provide political and economic bases for the civil authority.

The establishment of the Kamakura bakufu signaled the beginning of more systematic incursion by warriors into *shōen*, as well as into the public land. The process of incursion was at first slow but gathered momentum during the thirteenth century. As a result, more and more of the income from the *shōen* and public land was captured by the warriors at the expense of the emperor, nobles, and temples, as well as the civil government. During the Muromachi period, there was a more systematic and thorough transformation of *shōen* and public land, shifting from these forms of landholding – the basis of the political and economic power of those supporting and benefiting from the civil authority – to fiefs. In contrast with the Kamakura bakufu, the Muromachi bakufu adopted more measures to impose dues on a regional basis and more forcefully promoted the interests of the warrior class as a whole at the cost of the political and economic interests of the nonwarrior elites. In the second half of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth, as the bakufu's power declined, the warriors in their

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capacity as regional and local powers were increasingly aggressive in depriving the civil elites of their remaining public land, *shōen*, and other sources of income. By the mid-sixteenth century, few *shōen* and little public land remained.

The growth of institutional capabilities to administer justice and the development of the bureaucracy occurred along with the rise in power of the warrior class and the steady transformation of *shōen* and public land into fiefs. In the Kamakura period especially, but also in the Muromachi period, laws and legal institutions to adjudicate disputes over rights to income from land and over other types of conflicts involving such matters as inheritance, became increasingly important to the polity and society. The bureaucracy and expertise necessary for effective governance also grew over time. Although their effectiveness was reduced as both bakufu lost power, the institutional capabilities to adjudicate and to administer that developed in the Kamakura period and continued to increase in the Muromachi period profoundly affected the course and character of Japan's medieval history.

Aided by the steady growth of productivity and output in agriculture, the medieval period was one of growing commerce and continuing monetization of the economy. Market activities that first increased in the capital in the late twelfth century accelerated from the mid-thirteenth century. By the middle of the Muromachi period, markets became accessible to all villagers across the nation, and the specialization of occupations, which still was limited in the early Kamakura years, progressed substantially, thereby increasing the skill and efficiency of merchants and artisans. As commerce grew, so did cities, nodes of transportation, and economic institutions.

With the growth of commerce and monetization resulting from the rapid increase in the use of coins imported from China, the political and economic conflicts expected in an increasingly market-oriented society became more frequent by the fourteenth century. These included disputes between moneylenders and borrowers (many of whom were warriors), between recipients and payers of dues over the mix of in-kind and cash dues, and between guilds and their would-be competitors. These and many other conflicts often involved, directly or indirectly, the political and economic interests of the bakufu, the civil elite, and the warriors.

The lives of the cultivators, by far the majority of the population, also underwent several significant transformations. Their collective lot improved principally because of the greater agricultural productivity, which resulted from the rising use of double cropping and fertilizer and, most importantly, the more intensive cultivation of paddies over

which cultivators enjoyed a slowly increasing degree of managerial freedom and ownership rights. Political developments and wars inevitably affected the cultivators' lives through *ad hoc* imposts, temporary dislocation, newly instituted levies, and other exactions. But by the Muromachi period, their ability to produce more and to benefit from market activities gradually helped them win political and social freedom at the village level, which in turn enabled them to govern their daily lives in matters such as the maintenance of law and order and irrigation. Through mutual aid and more effective collective actions demanding the reduction of dues and mitigation of other political and economic threats to their well-being, cultivators became better able to cope with hardships imposed by nature and by the ruling elites.

A very important part of this medieval history is the new Buddhist sects and Zen Buddhism that became an integral part of Japanese society and culture during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, as well as the *noh* plays, tea ceremonies, linked verses, *sansui* paintings, *shoin*-style architecture, and many other cultural pursuits and manifestations that flourished especially in the Muromachi period. Surprising as it may seem, many elements of what we today view as Japanese culture were firmly established in medieval Japan, despite the rise and fall of the two bakufu and all the political turmoil and warfare that the political developments of this period entailed.

The renewed inflow of Buddhist teachings from China and, more importantly, the adaptation of these teachings and the adoption of innovative methods of proselytizing by the leaders of the new sects and Zen Buddhism altered the place of Buddhism in society and in the daily lives of both the elites and the commoners. Kamakura warriors' lives became imbued with Zen Buddhism, and the social and political histories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were changed by the influence of Buddhism on warriors and commoners alike. The best-known results of these developments were the growth of religious institutions led by politically powerful temples, the increase in the number of temples across the nation, and the persistent and often successful rebellions by the followers of a few sects in the waning years of the Muromachi bakufu and into the Sengoku period. The motivations for these rebellions against warrior overlords were not all religious, but it is impossible to explain their character and scope without considering the religious motivations involved in these political uprisings by peasants and some warriors.

The cultural developments in the Muromachi period took various forms and were deeply affected by Buddhism. Under the active patron-

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age of the Ashikaga shoguns – Yoshimitsu and Yoshimasa in particular – the cultural life of the elites reached its height, and the legacies of the elite culture from this period in literature, the performing arts, painting, and architecture continue to form an important core of Japanese culture. Commoners also contributed to the flowering of culture in these centuries. Their dance, music, and songs – often rustic but also affected by the world view of Buddhism – added color and energy to their lives and, as typified in the *noh* performed for the enjoyment of the elite, villagers' dances and songs often provided the basis from which the highly refined elite culture evolved.

Finally, in outlining the history of medieval Japan, one can hardly fail to note the influence of Japan's East Asian neighbors on Japan's medieval history and that of Japan on China and Korea. Japanese pirates (*wakō*) persistently pillaged the coasts of China and Korea throughout this period. Although partly motivated by trade, the most notable effect of these *wakō* was continual diplomatic friction. China was the source of Buddhist teachings and virtually all the coins used in medieval Japan, and it was Japan's most important trade partner, as evidenced in Japan's efforts to maintain the tally trade (the officially sanctioned and restricted trade) with Ming China. The continent, however, was also the source of medieval Japan's most trying diplomatic and political-military experiences. The Mongol invasions of the last decades of the thirteenth century imposed heavy political and economic burdens on Kamakura Japan, contributing to the fall of the bakufu. The frequent and, at times, threatening demands made by Ming China on the Ashikaga bakufu to accept the status of tributary state forced the shogun and his bakufu to acknowledge that medieval Japan was part of East Asia in which China considered itself the unchallenged hegemonic power.

The collective goal of the authors of this volume is to describe more fully and to analyze more closely the various parts of this history. In this Introduction I shall summarize the methodological orientation of both Japanese and Western specialists in the medieval period. This overview will help acquaint readers with the essential characteristics of Japanese historiography which, for Western specialists, serves as an indispensable source of learning and research. This summary of Japanese historiography may also be useful to nonspecialists who want to read the translated works of Japanese authors cited in the selected bibliography following the Introduction. This bibliography of works in English is presented only to aid nonspecialist readers of this volume

and is not intended to be comprehensive. In addition, for discussions of historiographies in Japanese and English, interested readers are invited to examine those works on historiography also cited in the bibliography following the Introduction.³

Following these short historiographical notes, I shall discuss, for each chapter of this volume, its historiographical significance and its contents and, in the footnote ending this short discussion, cite the more recent works in English that refer to the topic of the chapter. I shall conclude with some of my reflections on the present state of Western historiography regarding medieval Japan.

A chronology of the main historical events and developments appears as an appendix to this Introduction, and a glossary of Japanese terms is appended at the end of this volume.

JAPANESE AND ENGLISH WORKS ON MEDIEVAL HISTORY

To understand Japanese historiography for the medieval period, one first must be acquainted with two *forces majeures* that shaped the character of the historiography and that had and continue to have profound effects on its essential character.⁴ One is Japan's national experience in the past hundred years of having been a latecomer to modernization and industrialization, and the other is the Marxist framework of analysis that was widely adopted by Japanese historians in the early decades of this century. Although the effects of both have been diminishing since the 1960s, even today they continue to mold and affect the works of Japanese historians.

It is not surprising that Japan's national experience of having been a follower of the early industrializers, of having eagerly pursued industrialization and modernization-cum-Westernization, influenced several prewar generations of Japanese historians. The most important question asked by historians around the turn of the century was, How and why did Japanese history differ from those of the industrialized Western nations? This meant that these historians had little choice but to be comparativists, often explicitly and always implicitly.

3 In discussing the historiography, thus the works included in the bibliography following the Introduction, as well as in referring to "Western" scholarship, I refer only to those works published in English. This reflects only the limitations of my linguistic competence and does not suggest that significant works in other Western languages do not exist. Readers should be aware, for example, that many important and useful works on the period have been published in German.

4 Readers who do not read Japanese but wish to gain a further understanding of Japanese historiography can examine Hall (1966, 1968, 1983), Mass (1980), Takeuchi (1982), and Yamamura (1975).

The main topics of study pursued by medievalists, therefore, were the similarities and differences in medieval institutions in Japan and Europe, the reasons for the differences between Japan and Europe in the pace of change in the medieval political economy, and the reasons for the assumed similarities in the patterns of evolution through history, from ancient to medieval and then to modern. In essence, the topics that attracted the most attention from Japanese historians of this period were, they believed, those that helped them see Japanese history as reflected in the historiographical mirror of the West. These and many other comparative questions continued to be asked into the first decades of this century, by pioneering medieval historians who focused on the search for similarities between the institutions and laws of medieval Europe and those of medieval Japan. The scholars who followed the pioneers gradually broadened the scope of their studies to compare and contrast medieval Japan's political and social organizations and patterns of landownership with those of medieval Europe.

Superimposed on this comparativist mold of historiography was the Marxist framework of historical analysis adopted by many Japanese historians and social scientists beginning around the time of World War I. The use of this framework quickly spread, and by the early 1930s it had become firmly established as the dominant method of historical analysis. There were two mutually reinforcing reasons for this development. One was the increasing intellectual and political commitment to leftist ideologies by Japanese historians and social scientists in these decades characterized by political suppression, the prolonged agricultural depression of the 1920s, and the Great Depression and rise of nationalistic militarism of the 1930s. The second reason was to build a broad analytic framework in which to place a methodological foundation for the comparative character of Japanese historiography.

The result was that many of the two generations of historians – those publishing in the interwar years and those in the immediate postwar decades – focused on examining and debating historical questions and issues that are significant within the scope of Marxist analysis. For medievalists, the most important of these questions was when Japan experienced feudalism, a crucial, preindustrial stage in the Marxist analysis. Debates among specialists concerning the periodization and character of Japanese feudalism were intense and often were both academic and political. In these decades, numerous monographs and articles were produced concerning many questions and aspects of medieval history significant within the Marxist framework.

No attempt will be made here to delineate these multifaceted and often heated debates. But it is useful to note that much of the debate within the Marxist framework of analysis focused less on an explicit comparison of Western and Japanese feudalism and their institutional characteristics. Instead, the debate concentrated more on when Japan experienced “pure” feudalism according to each scholar’s interpretation of Marx’s definition of the term; on the validity of each scholar’s characterization of the patterns of landownership, methods and forms of payments of peasant dues, and motivations for interclass struggles; and on how these patterns, forms, and motivations changed over time.

Before the early 1960s, many scholars’ works were implicitly motivated by their political ideology, and the Marxist interpretation of medieval history enjoyed its heyday in the late 1940s and 1950s. However, the ideological motivation grew less and less evident in the 1960s, and by the 1970s many scholars used the Marxist framework of analysis and vocabulary merely as familiar and useful tools of historical study that had been generally accepted by their profession.

The preoccupation of two generations of historians with questions and issues within the Marxist framework of analysis had a few other important effects on the historiography of the period. One was that the profession was not hospitable to those who wished to study such aspects of the period as cities, social life, religion, and culture that were not central to the Marxist analysis. An important result was that scholars studying these topics tended to adopt the Marxist framework of analysis and to use as much as possible the Marxist vocabulary.

The other consequence of the profession’s preoccupation with Marxist analysis was that economic history became a political-institutional economic history concentrating on interclass politicoeconomic conflicts and the characteristics of production methods in each stage of history that gave rise to and defined the nature of these conflicts. To this day, there is no monograph on Japan’s medieval economy that uses the analytic insights of modern (neoclassical) economic theory, as is found in large numbers in the study of the European medieval economy.

But this began to change in the 1960s, becoming more perceptible in the 1970s. The numerous reasons for this change are related, the principal one being that many Japanese began to perceive that Japan had completed its “catch-up” period of industrialization/modernization. Marxist analysis, while still exerting a strong influence on the profession, slowly but steadily lost its former grip, as demonstrated by the increased number of works whose methods of

analysis and central questions deviated from those that had preoccupied earlier scholars. This trend has been strengthened, moreover, because the immediate postwar generation of scholars is being replaced by a new generation that generally is not as interested as their predecessors had been in the questions that arose directly from the Marxist framework of analysis. The sudden rise in the number of active professional historians since the 1950s (owing to the larger number of academic posts that became available in universities created after 1945) also has contributed to this trend.

The change, however, is occurring slowly, and so it may be more accurate to characterize the historiography of the medieval period as being in transition. Signs of transition are today found in, for example, the fact that more and more case studies of historical figures, regional political institutions, and forms of economic change are being undertaken, not to provide evidence for the validity of the Marxist analysis, but to offer descriptions and analyses with less and less direct relevance (if any at all) to the Marxist framework of analysis. As yet, extrapolating from such a recent trend is premature. The studies that have appeared in the past fifteen years have not yet challenged in any fundamental ways the Marxist core of the institutional and political-economic history of medieval Japan. Whether or not the process of transition that has begun will gain sufficient momentum to challenge the Marxist framework and rewrite the history of the medieval centuries remains to be demonstrated.

Except for the few instances noted, serious professional study of medieval Japanese history by scholars writing in English did not begin until after World War II. What works were available in the prewar years were limited to naive accounts based on translations of the great Japanese historical narratives such as the *Heike monogatari* or *Azuma kagami*. The history of premodern Japan consisted of the “interweaving of great and petty men and events” and an analysis of what human emotions lay behind the narratives contained in “diaries, war tales, morality pieces, and the more fanciful chronicles.” History was to be understood “through dialogue and overt (covert) passion.” And in the prewar decades, “the rendering of a famous text was evidently considered task enough.” Thus, “there were no monographs, and – lacking these – little experience in learning to use sources critically.”⁵

A significant exception to this was the work of Asakawa Kan'ichi,

⁵ Mass (1980), p. 63.

the Japanese-born Yale scholar, which was published in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of his works were on the medieval land system, and they were the first – and for years the only – studies of the *shōen* system available to Westerners that made extensive use of documentary evidence. Asakawa's studies, however, were comparative; he was searching for similarities between the medieval land systems of Japan and Europe. The other exceptional scholar of the prewar period was George B. Sansom. His major prewar publication, *Japan: A Short Cultural History*, may have relied too heavily on the “history-through-narrative” approach and may not have been comprehensive in coverage, but it provided a vivid picture of Japanese history and numerous interpretive insights.⁶

Although ironically the study of Japan began in earnest as a result of World War II, its medieval history was neglected during the immediate postwar years. The reasons for this include the strong interest in the post-1868 period of a large majority of Western historians of Japan and the linguistic barrier to using original medieval documents. And as is still true today, anyone attempting to begin a serious study of the period must learn the Marxist analysis and vocabulary that the Japanese continue to use.

This neglect of the medieval period ceased rather abruptly in the mid-1970s when, relative to the still very small number of specialists, there was a sudden profusion of works on many aspects of the medieval period. But before describing the works that have appeared during the past fifteen years, we must first discuss John W. Hall's *Government and Local Power in Japan, 500–1700*, published in 1966; this work in a real sense began a new chapter of study of medieval Japan in the United States.

The historiographical significance of Hall's book is that he demonstrated that Japanese history can be written using what he called the concept of familial organization as the fundamental authority-conveying force within the Japanese sociopolitical structure, which he defined as

not a narrowly defined kinship organization, but rather the extended *uji* system in which family and “family-like” bonds extended over branch (*ichimon*), allied (*fudai*) and even subordinate (*kenin*) families surrounding the

6 Some scholars might also include James Murdoch, *A History of Japan*, as an exception. However, Volume I of his work, beginning with the “origins” and ending with the “arrival of the Portuguese in 1542,” is of extremely limited interest to the students of the period it covers, despite occasional insights and lively narratives. This is an idiosyncratic work of an able and tireless amateur in the original positive sense of the term, but it is unable to withstand scholarly scrutiny, as Sansom's work still can.