



## Shoguns, Samurai and the Japanese Middle Ages

This video gives an overview of Japanese political history during the medieval period. As power became decentralized and then centralized again, different classes in society rose to prominence. As the emperor lost political influence, military rulers and warriors called daimyo and samurai rose to power.





**00:01**

*Timeline shows the Heian period (794-1185); painting of Minamoto Yoritomo*

As we get into the late Heian period, you start to have the emergence of a increasingly powerful warrior class. And all of that comes to a head in the year 1185, when the Heian period ends, and a general by the name of Minamoto Yoritomo comes to power. And what's significant here is, the notion of an emperor continues to exist, but all of the power resides in what you can essentially consider a military dictator, or a shogun. And the system that emerges is known as the bakufu system, or the shogunate. And Minamoto Yoritomo was the first shogun. So you can see here, the emperor still was there, but the shogun was where all of the power was. And this is really the beginning of medieval Japan. It's the beginning of the Kamakura period, named for where the capital of the Kamakura period was.

*Kamakura period (1185-1333)*

**01:08**

Now, what's distinctive about medieval Japan and the bakufu system is that it becomes much more decentralized than what we had under the Heian period. It's often called a feudal system, because it has parallels to what was going on in Europe at around the same time, where, at the top, you had this military ruler, the shogun, and then beneath the shogun, you had this decentralized structure of these lords, essentially, that controlled significant regions of Japan. They were called the daimyo. And there were roughly 300 daimyo in Japan, roughly county-sized districts. And the daimyo, in order to conquer land, or to protect their own land, they would support a warrior class known as the samurai. And so they would take their agricultural surplus from their lands and use that to support this warrior class. And this warrior class, the samurai, they were analogous to knights in medieval Europe, and just as the knights had chivalry in Europe, the samurai in Japan had bushido, which eventually emerges as their code of conduct.

**02:17**

*Painting depicts the Mongols shooting at a Samurai warrior on horseback*

Despite that decentralized nature, they were able to fend off invasions from Kublai Khan. So as we've mentioned in other videos, in the 1270s, Kublai Khan is conquering much of China and he also attempts to conquer Japan. This right over here is a picture of the Mongols shooting arrows at a samurai warrior. Now, one of the key factors that keeps Kublai Khan from taking over Japan is, on two different occasions, as they send their boats from what we now consider to be Korea to Japan, they encounter significant storms that destroy most of the boats, and so the Mongols who are able to get to land are significantly depleted, and they're pushed back by the samurai warriors.

**03:09**

*Muromachi Period (1336-1573)*

Now, the Kamakura period continues on until 1333, when there is a brief, only a few years' restoration, of the power of the emperor, but a few years after that, another shogun comes to power, and that is Ashikaga Takauji. And this is the beginning now of the Muromachi period. The Muromachi period is often known as the Ashikaga period or the Ashikaga shogunate, but it's named Muromachi for the district of Kyoto at which it had its capital. And even though, over the course of the Muromachi period, the emperor at different points was subsumed into the power of the shogun, this is considered—especially the later Muromachi period—as one of the more fragmented times of Japanese history. You had many civil wars. You had a lot of internal conflict. And it was only at the end, as we get to the end of the 16th century, that Japan gets reunified. And one of the key factors that allows it to get reunified is that in the middle of the 16th century, Portuguese traders show up and they introduce guns to Japan.

**04:26**

*Portraits of Oda  
Nobunaga, Toyotomi  
Hideyoshi, Tokugawa  
Ieyasu*

And one daimyo in particular is able to take significant advantage of those guns, and that is Oda Nobunaga. Oda Nobunaga, as I mentioned, was a powerful daimyo, one of these lords who controlled what you can kind of consider to be a county of Japan, and, using these guns, he's able to put most of the other daimyos, most of the other lords, into submission, and he begins to significantly unify Japan. Now, he is eventually assassinated, and his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, continues to unify Japan even further. When he dies, Tokugawa Ieyasu takes power, and he's able to consolidate even further, and definitively becomes the ruling shogun of Japan.

**05:18**

*Edo Period (1600-1868)*

Now, even though this period that we're entering, the Edo period—and it's named for the castle Edo, from which the Tokugawa shogunate ruled—even though this continues to be a shogunate, with a shogun in power at the top, the bakufu system—the reason why this is considered the beginning of the modern period, or the early modern period, is that Japan was finally unified again.

Now, one thing that we will see as we get into the 19th century, as we get into the end of the Edo period, and then you have the Meiji restoration, where you have imperial rule again, is that Japan is very good at borrowing technology and ideas from other cultures, and then making it their own. We saw that in the classical period, where they imported ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, imperial government from the Chinese, but adding their own flavor to it, and we will see it again as we get into the 19th century, when Japan is one of the first countries not just in Asia, but in the world, to truly industrialize by learning many of the technologies that get pioneered in the West.