

## Samurai and Knights: Were the Similarities Greater Than the Differences?

You live in a country with a weak government and an even weaker army. During your ancestors' time, an emperor ruled and kept the country together. Now, however, the central government has lost power, and dangers lurk beyond every moat and castle wall. Warlords fight each other to see who can control the most territory. Warriors from other lands threaten to invade and destroy your way of life. How can men, women, and children in your region protect themselves?

About one thousand years ago, people in two societies halfway around the world from each other faced this problem. In Europe, the mighty western Roman Empire had fallen in the late 400s, leaving a continent divided among weak kingdoms. A new western European empire arose briefly but it, too, soon fell apart. On the other side of the globe, Japanese emperors and the imperial court was challenged by the rise of **clans**. Like Europe, Japan found itself in pieces.

To keep order in the land, both regions developed a system that historians call **feudalism**. Lords acquired large estates of land. They granted some of their lands to lesser nobles who promised to fight for the lords when conflicts arose. In turn, these nobles trained warriors who, in exchange for farmland or food and lodging, swore to be loyal to the nobles and to defend them. The warriors of Europe were called **knights**. The warriors of Japan were called **samurai**. At the base of the feudal system in both Japan and Europe were peasants who farmed the land and provided food for the classes above them.

During the late 1100s in Japan, two large military clans called the Taira and the Minamoto fought to control the country. The Minamoto won the civil war and set up a new government headed by a powerful general called the **shogun**. It is fair to think of the shogun as the top

samurai, the head man of the samurai warrior class. Over the next several hundred years, various shoguns rose and fell. Each ruled the country in the name of the emperor—yet the shogun really held the reins of power.

Europe never developed a position quite like the shogun. Instead, because most of Europe had converted to Christianity, the Catholic Church acted to unify the many kingdoms. The Pope, head of the Church, held power over rulers because he could excommunicate, or ban, them from the Church. On some occasions in England, France, and what is now Germany,

lords gathered together a following of knights and answered the Pope's call to go on crusade against the Muslims in the Holy Land. At other times, conflict was local, pitting lord against lord, or France against England. The important idea is that from roughly 1000 to 1600 CE in Japan and Europe, samurai horsemen and knight horsemen were the muscle

and the soul of the warrior class.

The idea of soul, and its blood relative honor, was very important to both groups. European knights developed a code of behavior called **chivalry**, which blended Christian ideals with military values. In Japan, the samurai warriors developed a code of honor called **bushido**. Bushido blended the Confucian values of obedience and duty with the Buddhist belief that life is temporary and full of suffering. The way to avoid suffering was by giving up selfish desires.

In this Mini-Q, you will learn more about the society, warfare, armor, codes of honor, and beliefs of these two warrior classes. Then you will answer the question before us: *Samurai and knights: Were the similarities greater than the differences?*



## Samurai vs. Knights: Were the Similarities Greater than the Differences?

- 1) Why did men and women need to be protected during the Dark Ages?
- 2) What system of government does Japan and Europe use keep their land in order?
- 3) Who were the warriors of Europe, and what was their code of honor?
- 4) Who were the warriors of Japan, and what was their code of honor?
- 5) How did the Catholic Church play a role in European society during this time?
- 6) In what way did the code of chivalry incorporate Christian values?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## The Rules of Courtly Love

Listed below are first, a definition of courtly love, and second, rules governing the love relationship which were debated by Eleanor of Aquitaine's Court of Love.

Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love's precepts in the other's embraces.

1. Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.
2. He who is not jealous cannot love.
3. No one can be bound by a double love.
4. It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing.
5. That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.
6. Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity.
7. When one lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of the survivor.
8. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.
9. No one can love unless he is impelled by the persuasion of love.
10. Love is always a stranger in the home of avarice.
11. It is not proper to love any woman whom one would be ashamed to seek to marry.
12. A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.
13. When made public, love rarely endures.
14. The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized.
15. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.
16. When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved, his heart palpitates.
17. A new love puts to flight an old one.
18. Good character alone makes any man worthy of love.
19. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.
20. A man in love is always apprehensive.
21. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.
22. Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.
23. He whom the thought of love vexes eats and sleeps very little.
24. Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.
25. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.
26. Love can deny nothing to love.
27. A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved.
28. A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved.
29. A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love.
30. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved.
31. Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.

## Chivalric Codes and Rules

### Ye Nine Points of Knightly Virtue

Honor  
Loyalty  
Liberality  
Pride  
Good Faith  
Bravery  
Glory  
Courtesy  
Unselfishness

### Ye Olde Knightly Code of Chivalry

1. Thou shalt believe all thy church teaches and observe all its directions.
2. Thou shalt defend thy church.
3. Thou shalt defend thy King and Queen unto death.
4. Thou shalt defend thy country against all whom oppose it without cessation and without mercy.
5. Thou shalt defend that of any charge unto death.
6. Thou shalt respect all those whom are weak, the poor and the innocent, and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them.
7. Thou shalt never lie and remain faithfull to thy pledged word.
8. Thou shalt never brandish thy weapon in anger nor for evil purposes.
9. Thou shalt perform scrupulosuly thy fuedal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of god.
10. Thou shalt be everywhere and always thy champion of the Right, the Good and the True, and forever the foe of Injustice, Tyranny and Evil.
11. Thou shalt always fight fair and in an honorable fashion.
12. Thou shalt be generous and give largesse to everyone.

### Knightly Rules for Chivalrous Love

1. Thou shalt avoid avarice like the deadly pestilence and shalt embrace its opposite.
2. Thou shalt keep thyself chaste for the sake of her whom thou lovest.
3. Thou shalt not knowingly strive to break up a correct love affair that someone else is engaged in.
4. Thou shalt not chose for thy love anyone whom a natural sense of shame forbids thee to marry.
5. Be mindful completely to avoid falsehood.
6. Thou shalt not have many who know of thy love affair.
7. Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies, thou shalt ever strive to ally thyself to the service of Love.
8. In giving and receiving love's solaces let modesty be ever present.
9. Thou shalt speak no evil.
10. Thou shalt not be a revealer of love affairs.
11. Thou shalt be in all things polite and courteous.
12. In practising the solaces of love thou shalt not exceed the desires of thy lover.

## Hook Exercise: Traits of an Honorable Warrior

**Directions:** Throughout history, the warrior class in certain societies has been expected to follow a code of conduct on the battlefield. This was true of Spartan soldiers in ancient Greece, the Mongols in Asia, and the Arapahoe Indians on the Western Plains. It was also true of the knights in medieval Europe and the samurai in Japan. Below is a list of eight situations that could confront a modern-day soldier. In each case check “yes” or “no” and be ready to explain your thinking.

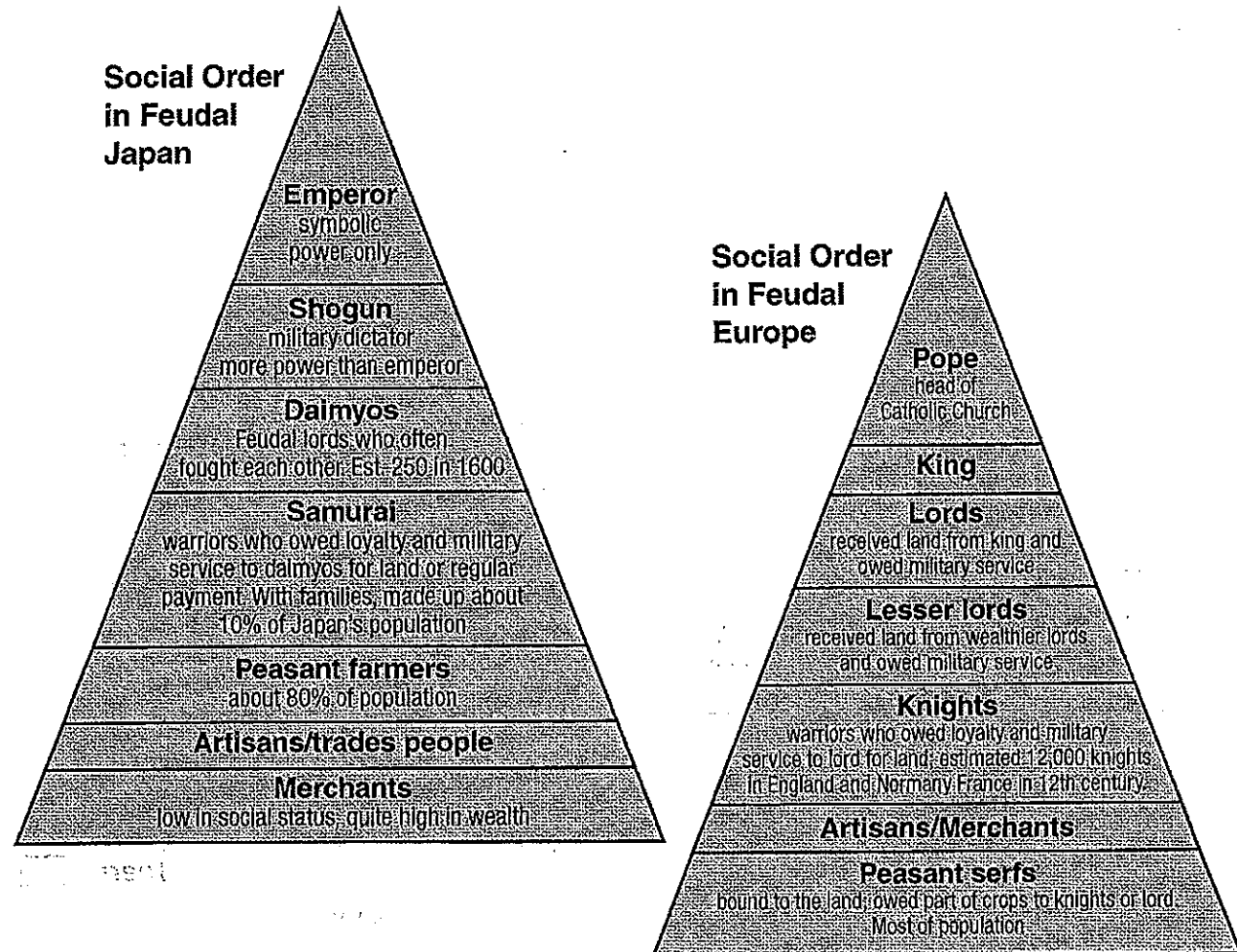
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Does an honorable warrior ever...	Yes	No	Rationale
retreat?			
kill civilians?			
disobey orders?			
fight for money?			
leave fallen comrades behind?			
torture a prisoner to get information?			
act as a sniper?			
admit that they are afraid?			

## Document A

Source: Charts created from various sources.

**Document Note:** Historians and other scholars use social pyramids to show how societies were structured. The people with more status, power, and wealth are at the top of the pyramid. Usually, the less status, power, and wealth a group has, the lower they rank on the pyramid.



## Document Analysis

1. What is the purpose of drawing a social pyramid?
2. What group in Japan was like lords in Europe?
3. In Japan, what was the relationship between samurai and daimyos?
4. In Europe, what was the relationship between knights and lords?
5. Based just on this document, were the similarities between samurai and knights greater than the differences? Provide evidence that supports your answer.

## Document B

**Source:** Catharina Blomberg, *The Heart of a Warrior: Origins and Religious Background of the Samurai System in Feudal Japan*, Curzon Press.

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Loyalty towards the feudal lord in Japan was hereditary.... (S)ervice of a feudal lord went from father to son, so that the relations of lord and (samurai) existed between many families for generations. This arrangement ... was at the same time a voluntary one, in that there was no (legal) binding agreement between the two parties. The European feudal contract, which was a legal document spelling out the obligations of lord and vassal respectively, never existed in Japan.

...(I)t became common to speak of the samurai's allegiance to his lord as lasting the duration of three lives... his past existence, his present one, and the next life.... The life of a samurai was not his own but belonged entirely to his lord, and it was the duty of a (samurai) to consider this at all times.... Not only the life of a samurai was at the disposal of his feudal lord, but also those of his wife and children....

**Note:** To receive a grant of land, an English or French nobleman knelt before his lord and pledged loyalty and military support. In return, the lord swore an oath of protection and granted a fief, or piece of land. This vassal thus became a lord and, if his landholding was big enough, could grant pieces of his new estate to vassal knights for the same oath of loyalty. (It took a fief of about 600 acres to enable a knight to support himself, his horses, his armor, his squire, and his family if he had one.) Unlike Japan, this feudal arrangement was usually not hereditary. The son of a knight was not obligated to become a knight and could discontinue the contract.

### Document Analysis

1. Where was the relationship between lord and warrior hereditary? What does that mean?
2. What evidence is there that the bond between lord and samurai in Japan was strong?
3. About how many acres might be required to support a knight in western Europe?
4. Based on the document, what was an important similarity between samurai and knights?
5. Based on the document, what was an important difference between samurai and knights?

## Document D

Sources: Samurai from Early Japanese Images by Terry Bennett; Knight from Art Resource.



In samurai armor (left), small iron scales were tied together, lacquered, and then bound into armor plates with silk or leather cords. The helmet bowl was made of 8 to 12 iron plates, and below it was a 5-piece neck guard. The body of the armor had four parts. Samurai did not wear armor on their right arm so they could easily draw their bow. One disadvantage of samurai armor is that when it became wet, the silk cords absorbed water and became very heavy.



During the 1200s, knights wore armor made of chain mail: tiny metal rings linked together. As more powerful weapons such as crossbows and longbows became common, chain mail was no longer sufficient protection. In response, knights began to wear complete suits of plate armor, constructed from metal. Not only was the entire body covered, but knights also wore helmets, gloves, and shoes of steel. Even horses wore armor. A knight's armor could weigh 40 to 60 pounds. The development of guns ended the use of armor. Any armor thick enough to stop a bullet would be too heavy for a person to wear.

## Document Analysis

1. What is the main purpose of suits of armor?
2. Both the samurai and knights generally fought on horseback. Who would have been in the most trouble if he was knocked from his horse or his horse was killed? Explain your thinking.
3. Military historians speak of the difference between shock warfare (striking the enemy with weapons like swords, lances, or axes) and projectile warfare (shooting or throwing arrows, javelins, and bullets). Judging from the armor, which kind of warfare was fought by samurai and knights? In each case, explain your thinking.
4. Based on the document, what was an important similarity between samurai and knight armor?
5. Based on the document, what was an important difference between samurai and knight armor?



## Document F

**Sources:** Poems written by Samurai circa 1400s; "The Song of Roland," circa 1100.

**Note:** Japanese samurai and European knights had different views of death. These samurai poems, written just before death, show the influence of Zen Buddhism. "The Song of Roland," a heroic epic poem about a French knight, shows the influence of Christianity and is the oldest surviving major work of French literature.

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### Samurai Death Poems

One day you are born  
you die the next —  
today,  
at twilight,  
autumn breezes blow.  
— *Chikamasa (c. 1400s)*

Had I not known  
that I was dead  
already  
I would have mourned  
my loss of life.  
— *Ota Dokan (1432-1486)*

### A Knight's Death

Now Roland feels that the end of his life has come. He has lain down on a steep hill with his face toward Spain and with one hand he beats his breast:

"God, I acknowledge my guilt and I beg for Thy mercy for all the sins, greater and lesser, which I have committed from the hour of my birth until this day when I lie here overcome by death!"

He has held out his right glove to God.  
Angels descend out of heaven and come to him.

— *The Song of Roland, author unknown.*

### Document Analysis

1. What is the main idea of the first samurai poem?
2. What is the main idea of the second samurai poem?
3. How would you describe the French knight's view of life?
4. In general, were the responses to death of the samurai and the knight similar or different? Explain.



