22

Warriors, Warlords, and Domains

David Eason

"Because the realm consists of warring states (*sengoku*), it is of the utmost importance to keep one's military equipment at the ready."[1] This was one among the many directives issued by the warrior leader Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) to his followers as part of the *Fundamental Laws of Kai Province,* a legal code first crafted in the sixth month of 1547. The warning was not only pragmatic but also astute, for instability and violence were two of the features most common to the latter half of the medieval age. Indeed, by the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the larger administrative landscape was one of extreme fragmentation, with the country subdivided into a patchwork of rival domains. Battles were frequent. So too were bitter disputes over goods, revenues, and land. Within the these shifting, conflict-ridden borders the influence and prestige formerly accorded to absentee noble and religious proprietors declined steadily, and the overarching authority once wielded by central institutions no longer held much, if any, sway. In place of these previously dominant outside interests arose new, local claimants to power as competing warrior houses attempted to establish their own regional regimes.

People of the time referred to the heads of these families using a specialized vocabulary indicative of respect. One term was *tono*, an honorific form of address initially assigned to the homes of the aristocracy, then to courtiers themselves, and finally to warriors. Another was *yakata*, an appellation with similar origins that, as of the mid-1300s, was limited in its application to a small and exclusive group of the shogun's most dedicated supporters. Starting in the fifteenth century, however, a widening circle of provincial commanders received permission

to adopt this designation until, during the sixteenth century, it was ultimately taken up as a title irrespective of official rank. Observing the political realities before them, Jesuit missionaries who traveled throughout the Japanese islands during the latter half of the sixteenth century readily defined *tono* and *yakata* as "lords." European visitors further characterized these elites as sovereign rulers and likened them to the more familiar cast of "nobles," "princes," and "kings" found back home. To both domestic and foreign observers alike, local warrior leaders were viewed as largely autonomous figures well deserving of esteem.

Historians have come to call these men by another name: *daimyō*, or as the word has often been translated in recent years, "warlords." This choice, which conjures up an image of ruthless strongmen constantly engaged in armed struggle, does have a certain appeal. Some warriors did employ arguably less-than-reputable means to acquire, hold, and enlarge the areas under their control. For instance, Takeda Shingen came to power by engineering the forced exile of his own father as part of a coup d'état staged in 1541, a troubling fact that his enemies eagerly highlighted when seeking subsequent justification for the seizure of his lands.[2] Moreover, it is also true that most local leaders of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries maintained a strong focus on military affairs. Again in the case of Takeda Shingen, this meant summoning followers for repeated incursions into nearby Shinano province; once he conquered the region, he imposed even heavier levies on the local warrior families there. The result was a marked increase in the frequency and scope of warfare, an outcome no less familiar to inhabitants of the many other areas whose local leaders pursued near-identical approaches and goals.

Another of these leaders was Imagawa Yoshimoto (1519–1560), Shingen's ambitious neighbor to the south. Born to the daughter of a courtier and sent to train as an acolyte in various Buddhist temples throughout much of his youth, Yoshimoto was an unlikely candidate for succession who became ruler over the provinces of Suruga and Tōtōmi only when his elder brother died suddenly from illness in 1536. Yet, upon seizing control of this territory, he promptly resumed the unfinished campaigns of his forebears, occupying fortresses in adjoining Mikawa province and then using them as a springboard to advance into regions even farther west. Thus, by the final years of the 1550s it was not unusual for Yoshimoto and his lieutenants to lead armies numbering in the thousands—in some instances, tens of the thousands. Mobilization of so sizable a force was no simple undertaking, however, and the logistical difficulties inherent in supplying and maneuvering such a vast assembly of soldiers were correspondingly immense. In response Yoshimoto moved to enact an assortment of military laws. These regulations, designed to instill discipline among his subordinates, included prohibitions on an array of behaviors that ranged from unauthorized plundering to unrestrained arguments and fights.

Restrictions of this sort were very much in keeping with the tendency among local leaders of the time to impose sweeping limitations on violence. Except, of course, when they were the ones promoting and directing its use.

In this way Takeda Shingen and Imagawa Yoshimoto had far more in common with each other than just geographic proximity. Both deserve the label "warlord," albeit with a twist. As purveyors of organized violence, they possessed an impressive ability to marshal large numbers of warriors. Equally outstanding was their unwavering determination to defend and expand the boundaries of their respective domains.

Nonetheless, their authority was by no means absolute. So-called warlords developed innovative strategies for enhancing their military capacities, including the construction of permanent, well-defended castles, the implementation of extensive cadastral surveys, and the accompanying requirement that local warriors contribute military support in strict proportion to the assessed value of their lands. Yet they also confronted lingering questions regarding the underlying legitimacy of their rule. There was, after all, no "divine right of daimyo" to which they might conveniently appeal. Instead, even the most independent of warlords sought to enhance their governing credentials both by claiming ties to the Muromachi Shogunate and through acknowledging their continued indebtedness to earlier institutions and laws.

FROM *SHUGO* TO DAIMYO

The post of *shugo*, or military governor, served as the primary link between local leaders and the Ashikaga shoguns, though it was a connection rendered increasingly remote and abstract as time went on. This relationship began during the 1330s when those appointed to the post were called upon to play a central role in providing the shogun with essential military support. The main responsibility of these military governors was to crush the continuing armed resistance offered by forces aligned with the Southern Court. To that end, they were also expected to requisition men and materials sufficient for the task.

For this reason the Ashikaga selected military governors from among the members of two separate groups. The first consisted of families that traced their descent through the same lineage as the shogun, families such as the Imagawa that, though small and undistinguished at the start of the fourteenth century, were thought to be more dependably pro-Ashikaga than the rest of their peers. As an added benefit, their kinship with the shogun ensured the warriors who fought under their banner an inside track when petitioning for rewards. The second group, on the other hand, was comprised of unrelated warrior families with considerably larger landholdings. The Takeda, for example, belonged to this latter category, having held military governorships at multiple points

throughout the preceding Kamakura period as well. Deemed less trustworthy but with greater resources at their disposal, the families in this group were often appointed to oversee those provinces where they held few hereditary properties of their own. The challenge was thus to balance reliability with potential utility and to create a system in which military governors would diligently serve the shogun without being able to accumulate the resources needed to mount a successful revolt.

The intent of Ashikaga leaders was clear. In 1338 shogunal officials had warned military governors not to overstep the limited authority entrusted to them during the Kamakura period, and counseled that "*shugo* who disobey the shogun's orders must be replaced."[3] It soon became apparent, however, that changes to this basic policy were necessary to ensure military governors the ability to keep their followers adequately supplied. Therefore, as fighting against the Southern Court—and, briefly, between rival factions within the Ashikaga leadership itself—intensified, military governors received permission to exact an annual "half tax" (*hanzei*) on the revenues collected from local estates. The measure was temporary and applicable to less than a dozen provinces when the first decrees were issued in 1352, yet military governors quickly transformed it into a regular impost. Moreover, around this same time military governors were also given additional responsibilities that included the investigation of lesser criminal complaints and the adjudication of certain types of property disputes. These developments enhanced the scope of their local jurisdiction. Even so, receiving such concessions did not release them from the larger framework of Ashikaga rule.

Far from it, for in the period that followed, the power wielded by shogunate leaders reached its brief but glorious peak. This was especially evident during the reign of the third shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), under whose authority a number of recalcitrant warriors were finally brought to heel. Significantly, the negotiated surrender of the Southern Court in 1392 finally removed the one unifying cause around which the Ashikaga's opponents had previously rallied. Thereafter, when the military governor who had helped to mediate this agreement launched his own, ill-conceived rebellion later that decade, he was swiftly defeated and his co-conspirators subsequently punished. Yoshimitsu continued to strengthen his position through carefully staged interactions with both the civil and the military elite. He provided lavish receptions for members of the nobility and acquired high court ranks that had not been held by warriors since the time of the Taira. To foster even greater stability, he also summoned military governors to the capital, creating an opportunity to both monitor their activities and impress upon them the splendor and permanence of his rule.

As the seat of the imperial court since the end of the eighth century and home to a host of leading temples and shrines, Kyoto had long functioned as

the focal point within a complex network of offices, titles, and valuable ties of patronage that brought together the lives and fortunes of both capital and provincial elites. During the Kamakura period the Hōjō family had maintained a presence in the city with the establishment of an administrative outpost at Rokuhara. But it was not until after the Hōjō's defeat in the 1330s and a decision by the newly ascendant Ashikaga to relocate their own headquarters to Kyoto that the city became a true center for warrior rule. This was symbolized by the completion of two major building projects during Yoshimitsu's tenure: the Muromachi Palace (Muromachi-dono)—hence the alternate name for the Ashikaga government—and his retirement villa at Kitayama, which included the Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion). Both of these structures amply demonstrated the affluence of the shogun, replete as they were with expensive materials and elaborate designs. What is more, they also suggested the degree to which cultural practices limited formerly to the aristocracy were now becoming available to a somewhat wider audience. For in addition to architecture and landscape design, subjects such as painting, poetry, and proper ceremonial etiquette soon joined the list of those interests and pursuits to which warrior leaders in the capital were increasingly drawn.

Military governors were some of the key participants in furthering this trend. Urged to move to Kyoto and construct elaborate, permanent residences within the city limits, they commissioned artists to apply a variety of classical motifs to the alcoves, walls, and sliding doors of their antechambers and reception rooms. Not limiting their patronage to painters, military governors also sponsored calligraphers, theater performers, and other "people of skill." They eagerly attended banquets, poetry gatherings, and courtier-led lectures on subjects as diverse as Heian period fiction, Buddhist metaphysics, and Confucian-inspired ethics. Many requested copies of the works under discussion and gradually amassed sizable collections of texts. Some became so well versed in the contents of these materials that they even produced glosses and commentaries of their own.

Such was the case with Imagawa Ryōshun (1325–1420), a figure renowned for his accomplishments in several different fields. Imagawa Yoshimoto's most illustrious ancestor, Ryōshun, was not only an experienced commander but also a skilled poet and prolific man of letters who left detailed instructions for his heirs. These precepts, likely produced around the year 1400, were among the earliest to frame warrior conduct in decidedly "public" terms. Specifically, Ryōshun insisted that leaders study both military and literary arts, defer to legal precedents, and hold regular meetings with followers as a means to solicit their counsel and listen to their pleas. He indicated that a failure to follow these steps would invite disaster, and admonished that "one who aspires to protect his territory without the benefits of learning will prove unable to govern" and that "whether in charge of a district or a province, it will be exceedingly difficult for you to exercise your abilities to the fullest if you lack the people's sympathy and

respect."[4] To instill fear was not enough. Rather, according to Ryōshun, an effective ruler inspired obedience through the proper and diligent performance of his official duties—a lofty ideal that resonated with later warriors as well.

At least as a theory, that is. For in practice few lived up to these aims, least of all the Ashikaga leaders of the early fifteenth century. The sixth shogun, Ashikaga Yoshinori (1394–1441), was notorious for his autocratic ways. Diarists living in and around Kyoto during the 1430s recorded that Yoshinori once ordered a follower to be placed under house arrest for having laughed during a ceremony. On another occasion he punished eight people for accidentally breaking the branch of a transplanted plum tree. And in the sixth month of 1433 he summarily banished all of the city's chickens, for a few days before, a flock of the birds had dared to disrupt one of his processions. Unsurprisingly, these and other instances of excessive, seemingly impulsive punishments did little to endear Yoshinori to his subjects, while several military governors began to openly decry the shogun's stubborn unwillingness to heed their advice.

Yoshinori did consult with military governors on almost one hundred separate occasions throughout the 1430s. Unlike the consistently convened Board of Councilors (Hyōjōshū) of the Kamakura Shogunate, or the formal assemblies arranged by earlier Ashikaga leaders, however, these meetings were highly irregular affairs. Since the mid-fourteenth century a *kanrei*, or deputy shogun, had been selected from among the Ashikaga's most influential collateral families to both oversee a council of military governors and coordinate the workings of other offices and boards. Yet Yoshinori frequently bypassed this deputy and held private gatherings attended by no more than two or three of his most trusted confidants. He also relied on a cadre of mid-ranking magistrates to transmit petitions to him directly, once again undermining the established roles of both his deputy and the council. These tactics enabled the transfer of considerable power to the shogun and were met with open resistance. Opposition intensified to the point that the *kanrei* and five other military governors even threatened to burn down their residences and return to the provinces in protest if Yoshinori did not moderate his ways. He did not, and in 1441, with rumors swirling that Yoshinori intended to move against the Akamatsu family of military governors, the Akamatsu struck first, inviting him to a reception at their residence and killing him there.

THE ŌNIN WAR

The assassination of Ashikaga Yoshinori was a desperate act prompted by the harsh misrule of a single individual. Yet it also figured within a broader pattern of deepening factionalism and spreading unrest that stretched well beyond the confines of the capital. Kyushu, the northeast, and even the Kantō Plain were

all areas where the influence of the Muromachi shogunate was inconsistent and often quite weak. The military governors from these regions rarely moved to Kyoto, and as a result the shogun held little direct leverage over their actions. For instance, following participation in a failed uprising in 1416, the Takeda were temporarily divested of their post as *shugo* until assistance from provincial warriors allowed them to regain their standing. Similarly, although the shogun endorsed an heir for the Imagawa family in early 1433, it was not until later that year, when the two competing claimants assembled their followers and attacked one another, that the matter was ultimately settled. By the middle of the fifteenth century most warrior leaders were far less preoccupied with securing the shogun's approval than with finding reliable sources of local support. At the same time, there also now arose an assortment of fierce and seemingly intractable quarrels that no amount of unilateral decision making could solve. These included succession disputes within two of the three families eligible to serve as *kanrei* and, beginning in the 1460s, another, even more serious inheritance struggle that involved members of the Ashikaga main line.

These crises culminated in the Ōnin War. Waged from 1467 until 1477, the long-running conflict was accompanied by destruction on a massive scale. The most severe damage was concentrated in Kyoto, where tens of thousands of warriors engaged in repeated raids and skirmishes that left over half of the capital reduced to ashes by the time they were through. Even so, other, less dramatic confrontations were equally instrumental in hastening the Ashikaga family's decline. For instance, the Takeda took advantage of these unsettled conditions to chastise local adversaries. Similarly, although summoned to join the fighting in Kyoto, Imagawa forces withdrew quickly in order to redirect their efforts toward the defeat of enemies much closer to home. They were not alone in abandoning the capital and concentrating on more immediate concerns. To the contrary, as hostilities continued to flare, military governors intensified their efforts to pacify the *kokujin*, or "men of the province," who collectively controlled the overwhelming majority of local lands. Military governors who succeeded in securing the services of these warrior families became warlords of their own well-organized domains, while those who did not were either overrun by aggressive neighbors or supplanted by ambitious subordinates who hailed from this very same *kokujin* class.

THE COUNTRY AT WAR

In the wake of the Ōnin War, the position of military governor withered and declined. To be sure, many of the most powerful warrior families of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries continued to occupy positions as *shugo*—the Akamatsu, Hatakeyama, Hosokawa, Imagawa, Kitabatake, Ōtomo, Ōuchi,

Rokkaku, Shimazu, Takeda, Toki, Uesugi, and Yamana, to name but a few. Moreover, various new appointments were also arranged. In 1558, Takeda Shingen was formally recognized as military governor of Shinano province. And during the early 1560s the Mōri family, minor *kokujin* who quickly rose to prominence thanks to alliances with other local warriors, received *shugo* posts for three provinces they had recently seized. Nevertheless, the belated distribution of titles in cases such as these merely reaffirmed, rather than fundamentally enabling, the exercise of authority. The Takeda and Mōri had already invaded and occupied the regions over which they were ultimately granted official recognition as governors, and it was their adherence to certain norms of rule, rather than any direct endorsement from the Muromachi Shogunate, that enabled them to preside successfully over their domains.

This wholesale shift in the distribution of military and political power did not escape the notice of contemporaries. During the early sixteenth century even some courtiers began to refer to their present era as a period of *sengoku*, or "warring states."[5] By this point battles among rival warlords were routine. In addition, whereas earlier generations of military governors had possessed a vested interest in preserving the old order, most of these new warlords were perfectly content to stand by and watch as it collapsed. Local warriors unceremoniously ousted those military governors who did not rush back from Kyoto to defend their territories, and even ones who managed to return were often met by deputies who had grown strong in their absence and who now refused to relinquish control.

These restless circumstances lent a new level of relevance to another word: *gekokujō*, an expression in reference to the phenomenon of "the low overcoming the high." As a descriptive term for social upheaval, *gekokujō* had already come into use among playwrights and satirists as early as the fourteenth century. But it gained even greater immediacy in the decades following the Ōnin War when it became a standard phrase to emphasize the widespread disorder and uncertainty of the time.

Warlords did not require endorsements from the shogun to justify their status. Nevertheless, they remained heavily indebted to the Ashikaga for providing them with an enduring model of rule. Nowhere was this reliance more apparent than in the realm of shared jurisprudence and the compilation of *bunkoku-hō*, or "domain laws." Such codes bore a strong resemblance to those previously issued by the Kamakura and Muromachi Shogunates. Similarities in vocabulary and style undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that many of these laws came from warlords who were also military governors and thus already familiar with the language of legal texts. But it was surely no coincidence that these detailed regulations began to proliferate in the aftermath of the Ōnin War, when a growing number of nobles, artisans, and scholars fled Kyoto and sought refuge in

the provinces. Neither was it an accident that both the Ōuchi and Imagawa, whose vibrant castle towns boasted populations comprising merchants, musicians, tea masters, and poets, were among the earliest warlord families to promulgate domain laws, in 1492 and 1526. Knowledge of legal norms was almost certainly one of the elements transmitted within this broader wave of cultural diffusion, a likelihood reinforced by the evidence of more than a dozen articles borrowed from Imagawa regulations and later included as part of Takeda Shingen's *Fundamental Laws of Kai Province.*

Both these and other domain laws were formulated in a manner that allowed warlords to pose as the practitioners of an impartial, "public" form of rule. As with the military governors who came before them, warlords continued to impose taxes and levies, compensate followers for their services, and oversee the transfer of land. In addition to these well-established prerogatives, however, they also assumed an expanded role as mediators. Just as the Muromachi Shogunate had banned battles among its military governors, warlords acted to similarly prohibit all fights and quarrels between the *kokujin* of their domains. Rather than participate in feuds now labeled as illegal and "private," local warriors were encouraged to turn to warlords for official adjudication. For as Imagawa Yoshimoto stated in a 1553 addenda to his family's code, although "there was once a period when *shugo* were appointed by the decree of the shogun," it was now time "to bring about tranquility through the use of laws based upon our own power."[6] No longer dependent on the Ashikaga, by the middle of the sixteenth century warlords claimed sole authority as the final arbiters in all matters of local dispute.

Warlords were bound to both enforce and uphold the laws of their domains. The *Fundamental Laws of Kai Province* stated this explicitly in the final article, where Takeda Shingen vowed to abide by the procedures for conducting investigations and punishments precisely enumerated throughout earlier sections of the code. Other warlords expressed a similar willingness to adhere to an integrated and consistent process for settling conflicts. For the Ōuchi this involved meeting with ten commissioners six times a month to review petitions. The Rokkaku, in contrast, relied on a council attended by the five most powerful local warriors in the domain. And in the case of the Imagawa, courts were held each month on the second, sixth, and eleventh day for suits filed by landholders in Suruga and Tōtōmi, while they were convened on the sixteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-sixth days for those originating in Mikawa.

There were limits to the jurisdiction of these courts. Children were not permitted to sue their parents, nor could subordinates lodge petitions against their superiors. Villagers, moreover, were required to bring cases before their local proprietors, who would then determine whether or not to pursue the matter. The preservation of hierarchical distinctions remained an overriding priority,

and courts were not accessible to all. But they did provide eligible warriors with a promising method of dispute resolution that was in many ways preferable to the dangers of armed combat. It was so advantageous, in fact, that during the late 1550s the Mōri, lacking their own domain law, were beseeched by followers to appropriate the code of the recently defeated Ōuchi. Subsequent records suggest that the family ultimately complied with these requests.

Serious consequences awaited those who failed to follow these laws. Depending on the infraction, local warriors faced a range of punishments that included fines, banishment, and death. Yet there were also dire risks involved for those warlords who, whether because of overconfidence or simple ineptitude, dared to disregard the regulations that they had established within their own domains. Leaders of the Rokkaku family discovered this in 1567 when, having just endorsed a set of domain laws, they then proceeded to deviate from these very same rules. "As there is a code, how is it that you can break it?" wrote one dissatisfied follower, casting into doubt the legitimacy of Rokkaku rule.[7] Comments such as these echoed the thoughts and practices of warriors in ages past. Institutions could be modified but not eliminated. Laws could be reinterpreted but not ignored.

Views like these lingered well into the Warring States period. But they did not last. For just a few months later Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) would complete his march on Kyoto, sweeping aside both warlords such as the Rokkaku and, eventually, the very last vestiges of the Muromachi Shogunate as a whole. The first of the "three unifiers," Nobunaga would acquire new sources for his authority. He, together with his successors, would transcend this old order and usher in a new and more stable age of warrior rule.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

See the bibliography for complete publication data.

Arnesen, Peter Judd. *The Medieval Japanese Daimyo: The Ōuchi Family's Rule of Suō and Nagato* (1979).

Berry, Mary Elizabeth. *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (1994).

Butler, Lee. *Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467–1680* (2002).

Elison, George, and Bardwell L. Smith, eds. *Warlords, Artists, and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century* (1981).

Grossberg, Kenneth A. *Japan's Renaissance: The Politics of the Muromachi Bakufu* (1981).

Hall, John Whitney, Nagahara Keiji, and Kozo Yamamura, eds. *Japan Before Tokugawa: Political Consolidation and Economic Growth, 1500 to 1650* (1981).

Hurst, G. Cameron III. "The Warrior as Ideal for a New Age" (1997).

Notes

1. From Article 15 of the "Kōshū hatto no shidai," reproduced in Satō Shin'ichi et al., *Chūsei hōsei shiryō-shū,* 3:197.

2. Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) was one such opponent who repeatedly chastised Shingen on this point, calling his actions both "unprecedented" and "shameful."

3. Grossberg, ed., *The Laws of the Muromachi Bakufu*, 26–28.

4. "Gusoku Nakaaki seishi jōjō," as reproduced in Ozawa, *Buke kakun, ikun shūsei*, 78.

5. The name "Warring States period" (Sengoku jidai, in Japanese) was borrowed from Chinese history, where it referred to the era of division (403–221 BCE) that followed the Spring and Autumn Period (770–403 BCE) of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Because sixteenth-century Japan was not actually divided into separate kingdoms (as fifth- to third-century BCE China had been), historians today sometimes translate Sengoku jidai as "age of the country at war."

6. From Article 20 of the Kanamokuroku tsuika, reproduced in Ishii Susumu et al., *Chūsei seiji shakai shisō 1*, pp. 204–205.

7. "Mikumo Shigemochi shojō," reproduced in Murai Yūki, *Sengoku ibun: Sasaki Rokkaku-shi hen*, 307–308.