

# Who Were the Samurai?



Detail of one of a pair of screens (*byōbu*), Japan, end of the 17th century–beginning of the 18th century. Painted fabric, colored inks, gold leaf, and wood frame. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy

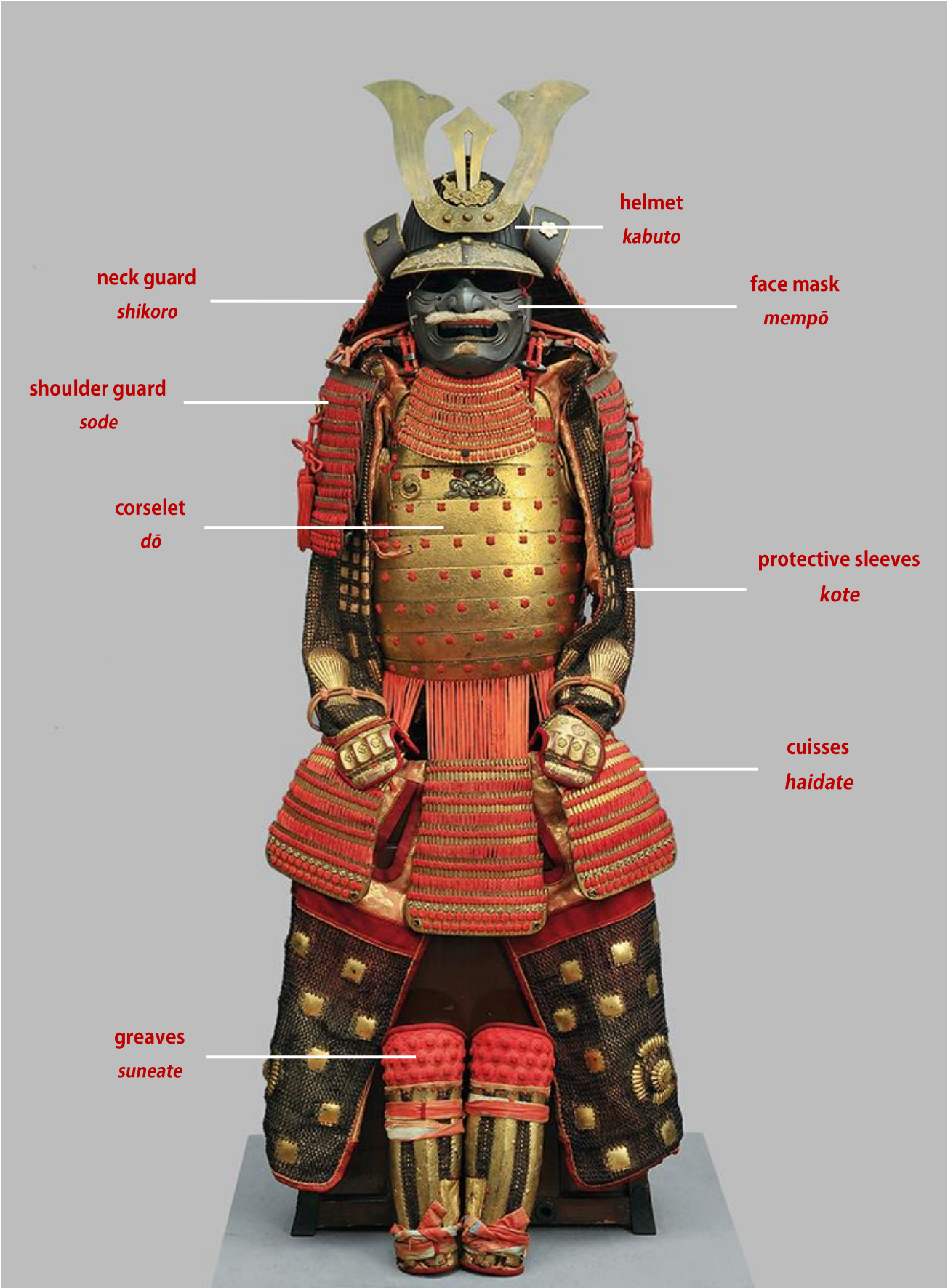
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The word *samurai* derives from the verb *saburau*, which means “to serve,” but a more apt term would be *bushi*, which literally means “military person,” referring to one who is proficient in the use of weapons. *Saburai* became synonymous with *bushi* by the end of the 12th century (Heian Period), and *samurai* eventually replaced *saburai*. The story of the samurai begins in the Heian Period (794–1185), when provincial warriors were called by an imperial mandate to defend the northeastern borders of the country from the Emishi, the indigenous population of Japan. They also protected the imperial court from antagonistic political and economic powers, and warrior monks who came into conflict with the emperor and his court.

The demand for samurai became so frequent that the warriors took advantage of their irreplaceable value, claiming territories and establishing their own rules for compensation. This organized military force became a political force that eventually relegated the emperor to a figurehead and took control of all political decisions. At the beginning of the twelfth century, during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333), the samurai achieved full power by establishing the first military government, or *bakufu*, under the emperor’s first appointed shōgun (supreme military commander), Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199).

# Samurai Armor

Samurai armor was of exceptional strength, while permitting the freedom of movement that was essential during battle. Although a full suit of armor (*gusoku*) could consist of more than twenty-three elements, there were six basic components: the corselet (*dō*), the helmet (*kabuto*), the face mask (*mempō*), the protective sleeves (*kote*), the greaves (*suneate*), and the cuisses (*haidate*), which protected the thighs. Shoulder guards (*sode*) were also important elements. Samurai armor evolved along with the weapons and tactics of the times.



Composite armor with bust in two parts and laced in red silk, second quarter of the 16th century and first half of the 18th century. Steel, copper alloy, silver, gilded copper, ivory, Asian water buffalo horn, wood (Japanese foxglove), silk, lacquer, and silk brocade. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy



# Samurai Helmet

The helmet (*kabuto*) is one of the most fascinating and distinctive parts of a suit of Japanese armor: it is the first element that is instinctively noted, and the first that is critically studied. The helmets have been admired not only because of the expressive power of their forms, but also because of the refined technology in their production. Although there can be many elements and variations in the full facial armor of a samurai, most *kabuto* share three common elements: the bowl (*hachi*), a suspended neck guard (*shikoro*), and frontal decorative crests called *maedate*. The neck guard is usually composed of semicircular, lacquered iron lames, attached with silk or leather lacing. Among the ornamental crests, stylized deer horns (*kuwagata*) in elongated forms are particularly common. The *kabuto* was secured to the head by a chin cord (*shinobi-no-o*), which would usually be tied to the face mask (*mempō*) or simply tied under the chin.



Haruta school. Helmet, first half of the 17th century. Steel, gilded copper, lacquer, gold, wood (Japanese foxglove), silk, and Japanese deerskin. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy

Helmet, first half of the 17th century. Steel, wood (Japanese foxglove), papier-mâché, lacquer, Japanese deerskin, horsehair, and silk. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy



# The *Katana*, Sword of the Samurai

From the Edo Period (1615–1868) onward, the most important weapon by far to a samurai was his sword; the *katana* was a symbol of social status and privilege, whether worn with armor or civilian dress.

Characterized by its unique curved shape, the *katana* was a perfect blade, its steel forged into a superbly crafted balance between firmness and flexibility. The flexibility allowed the sword not to break upon impact while the firmness of the blade permitted a deadly blow with one single gesture. It was most often wielded with both hands as a weapon of attack and defense and was carried with the cutting edge facing upward, secured by a sash (*obi*) to permit the quicker draw of the sword.

The traditional swordsmanship discipline was refined over the centuries into a true martial art, *kenjutsu* (the art of the sword). Even the motion to extract the *katana* from its sheath had a specific technique within the discipline and was carefully studied and practiced.



Suishinishi Fujiwara Masatsugo, Taikei Naotone School. Sword (*katana*), with seal (*kao*) and date in Japanese: *Tempō kyutsuchinoe inunen chūshun nichi*, Japan, 1838. Steel. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy



Sword (*katana*), Japan, end of the 16th–beginning of the 17th century. Red oak, boxwood, rosewood, ebony, ivory, horn, tortoise, malachite, and mother-of-pearl. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy

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The manufacture of the curved one-edged blades of the Japanese *katana* was truly an art form, rooted in ancient traditions and involving complex metallurgical processes. During the earliest periods, fundamental techniques such as the smelting, forging, and finishing differed from province to province and from workshop to workshop. In the 1600s, however, control and unification of swordsmith techniques was assumed by the shōgun, and the differentiation among traditions became merely stylistic. The manufacturing process demanded precise, time-consuming steps to transform raw iron ore into an exquisite work of art.

# Samurai & Horses

Horses were probably introduced to Japan from China or Korea in the 4th century. By the early Heian Period (794–1185), horses had become an irreplaceable part of the noble warriors' equipment. These horses, most likely Mongolian stock, were stout and short-legged, well suited to the warriors' need for a stable platform for mounted archery. They were trained to be controlled just by the rider's weight and legs, leaving the samurai's hands free to fight with his bow and arrows. As battlefield tactics changed because of the large number of foot soldiers, a force of mounted spearmen emerged, and horses remained the chosen privilege of the elite samurai. The horses were considered status symbols since only the upper-class samurais were allowed to ride them.



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Sadayasu and Masatomo. Saddle (*kura*), Japan, mid-17th century. Red oak, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, gold, hemp, and silk. Collection of Museo Stibbert, Florence, Italy

This beautiful saddle (*kura*), in the *wagura* style, is of the *karakura* ceremonial type with circular pommels. On the sides of the front pommel the fitting for the reins can be seen. Against a black background, the entire saddle is decorated in *aogai mijin togidashi*—that is, small, perfectly square flecks of iridescent mother-of-pearl with diamond-shaped pieces, also of mother-of-pearl, sporadically inserted. The saddle was then polished to a mirror-like finish with a vegetable carbon.

On the outer parts of the pommels, decorations in light relief of lion figures (*karashishi*), flowers, and peony (*botan*) leaves were made from gold and silver. The edges of the pommels were lacquered in silver powder and then polished. The saddle is signed under the seat (*igi*) by Sadayasu and Masatomo, but little is known of these craftsmen other than they operated in the mid-17th century.

# The Edo Period (1615–1868)

After a long period of civil war, the victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) at the Siege of Osaka in 1615 marked the beginning of Japan's transition into 250 years of stability and isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate. This period is also known as the Edo Period, referring to the ancient name of Tokyo, where Ieyasu established his capital. While the emperor still ruled in name from his court in Kyoto, the true power to govern the country resided in Edo with the shōgun. One of the first goals of the Tokugawa government was to enforce the peace. A revised feudal hierarchy emerged: the shōgun had national authority and some three hundred loyal *daimyō* (clan lords) had regional authority; their lands were administered through a large bureaucracy of paid samurai retainers. Social order was based on inherited position rather than merit. On top were the emperor and imperial nobles together with the shōgun and *daimyō*. Below, a rigid four-class hierarchy was imposed. Samurai, stratified into many levels of status, were followed by peasants, who accounted for more than 80 percent of the population. Last were traders and merchants. Below this were practitioners of occupations that broke the taboos of Buddhism, such as butchers, undertakers, beggars, and entertainers, all of whom were required to live in a special quarter of the city. A strict code of laws regulated all aspects of samurai life: private conduct, dress, types of weapons, and the number of troops that a *daimyō* was allowed to retain.

Samurai largely became paid bureaucrats during the Edo Period; their weapons became merely symbolic of status. The relative peace of the era, however, did foster economic prosperity and a flowering of culture marked by philosophical reflection, the development of neo-Confucian thought, the pursuit of enjoyment, and the search and discovery for aesthetic qualities in objects and actions.

## End of the Samurai

Many samurai families became impoverished as the lower merchant class amassed wealth, undermining their authority. Drought, famine, and natural disasters had all affected the agrarian-based (rice) economy, leading to peasant unrest. Many among the elite started to turn to the emphatically anti-Western emperor for solutions. In July 1853, in an attempt to impose a trade agreement on Japan, Commodore Matthew Perry's massive fleet of US steamships, known as "the black ships" in Japanese, fired weapons from Edo Bay. The immediate result of this threat was a compromise that led to the opening of ports to American ships. This contributed to the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the end of samurai government in Japan.

The forced opening of Japanese ports to foreign intervention had enormous consequences, but perhaps the greatest was the turmoil and division it created among the once-cohesive *bakufu* government; various factions vied for control. Ultimately, opposition to the last shōgun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu (1837–1913), led to the restoration of the young Emperor Meiji as the supreme authority in 1868. Initially, Tokugawa Yoshinobu resigned in hopes of preserving his family's social position, but an imperial decree abolishing the house of Tokugawa led to the Boshin War between forces loyal to the Tokugawa and those supporting the return of political power to the imperial court. The imperial forces prevailed; although clemency was eventually extended to the Tokugawa, one immediate reform of the new government was the expropriation and abolition of the samurai class in 1869.