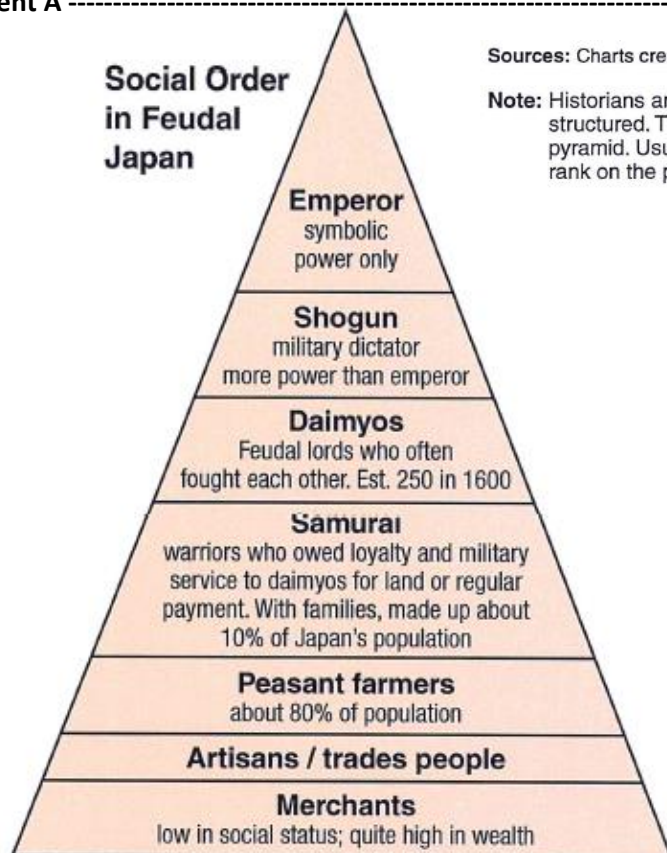


**Overview:** More than a thousand years ago, a class of professional warriors arose, who swore oaths of loyalty to noble lords and fought to the death to defend them in battle. Interestingly, this happened at about the same time in both Japan and Europe, even though the regions were thousands of miles apart. The Japanese called their warriors samurai; the Europeans called their warriors knights. Study the documents provided and answer the question: Samurai and Knights: Were the Similarities Greater Than the Differences?

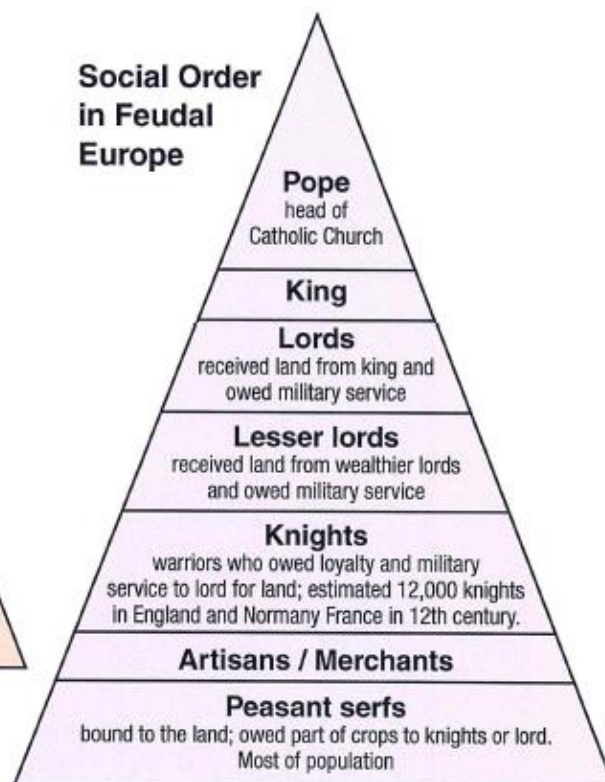
- 1066** – William the Conqueror from France becomes king of England. Establishes feudal system in England.
- 1099** – European knights join First Crusade and capture Jerusalem.
- 1192** – Minamoto Yoritomi becomes the first shogun. Samurai class on the rise.
- 1215** – English barons force King John to sign the Magna Carta, protecting their rights.
- 1274** – Mongols attempt to invade Japan but fail because of a storm.
- 1347** – The plague kills about one-fourth of the European population.
- 1337** – Beginning of Hundred Years' War fought between France and England
- 1500s** – Guns and bullets bring an end to fighting in armor plate. Knights fade from history.
- 1603** – Tokugawa shogunate begins 260 years of relative order to Japan. Many samurai become bureaucrats.
- 1868** – Samurai class officially ends in Japan

#### Document A



Sources: Charts created from various sources.

**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 B

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

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 C

Source: Adapted from the PBS series "Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire," 2004.

The rigorous training (of samurai) ... began in childhood .... (S)chool was a unique combination of physical training ... poetry and spiritual discipline. The young warriors studied Kendo (the art of fencing with bamboo sticks), the moral code of the samurai, and Zen Buddhism. (At about age 14 the trainees officially became samurai in a ceremony called *genpuku*.) Samurai were expected to live according to Bushido, a strict ethical code influenced by Confucianism that stressed loyalty to one's master, respect for one's superior, ethical behavior in all aspects of life, and complete self-discipline. Girls also received martial arts training.... [Though samurai women] did not fight on the battlefield, they were prepared to defend their homes against invaders.

Source: Adapted from the PBS series "Warrior Challenge," 2003.

[A] prospective knight's training [began at age four or five] with learning to ride a pony. By the age of seven or eight, he would be sent to serve as a page to his father's overlord or to a powerful relative. There [he ran errands and practiced] with blunted or wooden swords ... refining his [horse] skills and receiving some religious instruction.... (B)y the age of 14, pages were eligible [to become] a squire. Squires continued with weapons training ... but were already considered to be fighting men. [They would accompany] their master knight into battle, dress him, feed him ... care for his horses and hope ... they would be deemed worthy. If a squire [gained approval from] an examining knight, he would usually [become] a knight at around the age of 21.

**Note:** A knight's training, especially in 12th-century France, produced knights who were skilled poets. Called *troubadors* because they traveled the country, a number of French knights made their living reciting poetry to an audience.

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 E

**Sources:** Yamaga Soko, *The Way of the Samurai*, 1600s;  
*Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, circa 1470.

**Note:** Both Japanese samurai and European knights were expected to abide by a code of honor. In Japan, this code came to be called bushido. In Europe a similar code developed that is generally called the code of chivalry.

### The Code of Bushido

The business of the samurai consists...in discharging loyal service to his master if he has one,\* in deepening his fidelity [loyalty] in associations with friends, and ... in devoting himself to duty above all. However, in one's own life, one becomes unavoidably involved in obligations between father and child, older and younger brother, and husband and wife.... The samurai confines himself to practicing the Way; should there be someone...who transgresses [does wrong] against these moral principles, the samurai summarily punishes him and thus upholds proper moral principles in the land.... (O)utwardly he stands in physical readiness for any call to service and inwardly he strives to fulfill the Way.... Within his heart he keeps to the ways of peace, but without he keeps his weapons ready for use.

\* Not all samurai had masters. Masterless samurai were called ronin and could be a problem.

### The Code of Chivalry

With great ceremony each [knight] took the vows of true knighthood, solemnly promising to do no wicked deed, to be loyal to the King, to give mercy to those asking it, always to be courteous and helpful to ladies, and to fight in no wrongful quarrel for worldly gain, upon pain of death or forfeiture [loss] of knighthood and King Arthur's favour. Unto this were all the knights of the Round Table sworn, both old and young. To dishonour knighthood was the greatest disgrace; to prove themselves worthy of knightly honour by strong, brave, courteous, loyal bearing under great difficulties was the highest end [goal] of living.

## 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.

### 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.