

Women Warriors of Early Japan

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Source: Yoshitoshi. *Hangakujo*. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 1885. Painting.

Women warriors were not a rarity in feudal Japan. The *onna-musha* (女武者) lived within a warring culture and with traditions of acquiring indispensable skills in martial arts, archery, and horse riding. “Sengoku battles often took the form of sieges wherein the entire family would fight to defend the castle” so it was necessary to be able to defend your family, children, and yourself.¹ The painting titled *Boki ekotoba*, dated to 1351, depicted a woman in armor, armed with naginata and bow. A journal record of “predominately female cavalry” is noted by Chancellor Toin Kinkata, who stated they, “originated in western Japan...which suggests that women from the west were most likely to serve in battle,” away from the capital cities.²

The historic depictions of these females are uncommon, however, because of the changes that grew out of the political and societal turbulence starting in the Kamakura Period. The apparent “paucity of references indicates that women constituted a distinct minority of warriors” but the opposite was more probable as evidence recording their accomplishments were lost to warring practices of the time.³ The existence and experiences of the *onna musha* have changed over history and as a result they are now viewed as a curious novelty of the time instead of simply exceptional individuals.

Tomoe Gozen

Tomoe Gozen (巴御前) was perhaps the most widely known *onna-musha* in Japanese history. “The archetypal samurai woman warrior,”⁴ she was chronicled in the *Heike monogatari*, which detailed her involvement in twelfth century battles of the Gempei Wars between the Taira and Minamoto clans. She was famed for her expert horsemanship, exceptional skills in archery and bravery in battle; Tomoe was “a powerful fighter, the equal of a thousand, capable of dealing even with demons or gods.”⁵

Lady Tomoe was the servant, lover and in some reports, a wife, of General Minamoto Kiso Yoshinaka. Tomoe's father was Nakahara Kaneto and more significantly, her mother was *menoto*, Yoshinaka's wet-nurse. “It was the custom in pre-modern Japan for children of rank to be suckled by a menoto...an honor usually bestowed as a reward for service. The *menoto* and her family played an essential role in bringing up and educating the child entrusted to them and they identified their interests completely with the child's.”⁶ Yoshinaka and his blood siblings were predestined for political competition with one another but his foster siblings, Tomoe included, were not. Power was passed on through male inheritance and literal blood-feuding for political power was common in the noble families. This was likely the reason for his close relationship with Tomoe, as there was no reason to fear her betrayal due to the influence of political strategizing.

Yoshinaka was engaged in political competition with his cousin Minamoto Yoritomo, who would later establish the Kamakura Shogunate. Tomoe accompanied Yoshinaka on his military campaigns and served him loyally on the battlefield. Significantly, she was entrusted with the authority as his “*ippo no taisho*, leading commander,”⁷ to lead troops into battle.

The *Heike monogatari* describes her alleged last fight on the battlefield at Awazu, after the mortally wounded Yoshinaka orders her departure to send news of his imminent death to his family in Shinano:

Tomoe made no move to go. But Yoshinaka insisted until at last she said: “At least I would like a worthy opponent. I would like to show you, my Lord Kiso, my last combat in your service.”

So she lay in wait for an enemy. And there appeared one famous for his strength throughout the province of Musashi, Onda no Hachiro Morishige, with thirty horsemen. Tomoe charged in among them, went straight to Onda no Hachiro, fiercely seized him and pinned his head on the pommel of her saddle, then wrenched it around, cut it off, and tossed it away. After that she removed her armor and escaped toward the East.⁸

The chronicle of Tomoe Gozen in *Heike monogatari* and its extended version *Genpei josuiki* “attribute different adversaries to Tomoe,”⁹ contributing

to the mystery of this onna- musha's history. Similarly, there remains much speculation about Lady Tomoe's departure from the battlefield. Author Stephen Turnbull states that Wada Yoshimori attacked her "using a pine trunk as a club...and made her his concubine."¹⁰ There are similar reports that say Yoshimori took her as his wife in hopes of producing strong warrior sons, gifted with skills that would prove favorable for Yoritomo.

Chieko Mulhern proffered that Yoshimori believed "...So valiant a woman would surely bear him valiant sons."¹¹ Folkloric hero Asahina Yoshihide, famed for his "colossal strength," was described in legends as Tomoe's son with Yoshimori. Furthermore, varied accounts say that despite her gender, Tomoe was destined for beheading by Yoritomo for her role as enemy commander.

Other sources say that Tomoe escaped her imprisonment, went into hiding and eventually became a nun who died at age ninety.¹² Whatever the case may be of her eventual fate, Tomoe Gozen and her reputation as ideal *onna-musha* endured. She has been celebrated in Kyoto's *Jidai Matsuri*, Festival of the Ages, which commemorates ancient Kyoto history and culture, with a portrayal in the festival's parade dedicated to historical medieval figures. Tomoe has been immortalized in anime, videogames, movies, and books, including a historical science-fiction-fantasy trilogy written by Jessica Salmonson, titled *The Tomoe Gozen Saga*.

The Jito

During the Kamakura Era, women in the Kanto region commonly held the position of regional land stewards, known as *jito*. This title involved the duties of a provincial manager, tax collector, and policing force that would enact, enforce and protect the *daimyo*-controlled lands. The Shogun appointed individuals, typically men, to these positions but the titles and authority could be passed in succession through a man's will to his widow or children. It is notable that "no other law except indifference excluded women from this kind of authority."¹³ Women in the Kamakura were also legally authorized to appoint others to this position in their place if they were so inclined.

Although it was implied that these titles would necessitate martial training for carrying out enforcement or policing duties on the estate, there has been little direct evidence that would substantiate any methods or training that these women completed to gain necessary skills. Nevertheless, these women were preponderantly of *bushi* class so it was not remarkable that they would have been trained in self-defense, to wield *tanto* (small blades) or *naginata* (polearms).

Hangaku Gozen

Hangaku Gozen was a member of the Taira clan who lived with her family in Echigo. Also known as Hangaku Itazaki, she was the daughter of Jo Sukenaga, who was defeated by Kiso Yoshinaka in battle. She joined

her uncle, Jo Nagamochi, and cousin, Jo Sukemori, in the Kennin Rebellion of 1201, and became an integral part of their defensive operations at Torisaka Castle.

Hangaku was noted for her leadership and bravery during the three month long defense during which she and Sukemori led forces of men against Sasaki Moritsuna's bakufu army, who were loyal to the Kamakura Shogunate. "Dressed as a boy, Hangaku stood on the tower of the castle and all those that came to attack her were shot down by her arrows which pierced them either in their chests or their heads."¹⁴ The rebel defenses were eventually struck down and Hangaku's fighting stopped only after she was wounded by an arrow that pierced her thigh.

She was captured and presented, "fearless as a man and beautiful as a flower,"¹⁵ as a prisoner of war to the Shogun Minamoto Yoriie, who was intrigued by her beauty and reputation. Lady Hangaku was precluded from ritual suicide by the Shogun's orders to marry his retainer, Asari Yoshito. Later, she reportedly delivered a son, but there is little record of the remainder of her life.

Tsuruhime of Omishima Island

Tsuruhime was born to the Chief Priest of Oyamazumi Shrine, Ohori Yasumochi, on the island of Omishima during a time of conflict between the Kono clan, under which her family was ruled, and the Ouchi clan, which strove to take control of the region. Tsuruhime inherited her father's position when he died of illness and she also assumed leadership of Omishima's defense against the threat of the invading Ouchi military. In 1541, the sixteen-year old Tsuruhime led an attack against the raiding Ouchi army. "Trained since childhood in the martial arts...she took charge of the military resistance" and successfully defended the island.¹⁶ It was recorded that Tsuruhime believed she was a manifestation of Mishima Myojin, Omishima Island's guardian *kami*. She was empowered not merely because of her inherited position, but moreso because of her divine belief that it was her life's purpose to defend the people of Omishima Island and the Kono clan.

The Ouchi returned four months later in a raid led by Commander Obara Nakatsukasa no Jo. Tsuruhime directed the surprise attack against the Ouchi forces, striking Obara one evening during a moment of respite, while he enjoyed entertainment and sake on his flagship. "Using a bear paw rake she climbed on board and sought out the general for single combat."¹⁷ Obara was described to be surprised, not solely by the instance of attack, but particularly because it was a woman who was in command. Armed with a sword, Tsuruhime swiftly defeated Obara while the defense army and Kono allies exploited their weapons advantage and unleashed a barrage of *horokubiya*, "spherical exploding bombs,"¹⁸ against the Ouchi fleet and drove them to retreat.

Tsuruhime's armor was collected in 1543 after she died by ritual suicide through drowning, following the death of her lover in battle against the Ouchi.

Tsuruhime was eighteen years old. Her suit of armor was enshrined at Oyamazumi Temple.¹⁹ The Shinto shrine's assemblage of military armament and weaponry has historically been an important site of worship by warriors and military. These warriors made offerings and prayed to Mishima Myojin for protection in battle. Over time, Tsuruhime's armor and other famous warriors' offerings became religious treasures and icons of worship.

The Sato Wives

Two Sato brothers served as Minamoto Yoshitsune's bodyguards for many years and were killed in his service. Their widows, Wakazakura and Kaede, observed common Confucian practices of mourning by wearing their late husbands' suits of armor over kimono. The custom was performed to show honor and filial piety and reportedly, also to appease and console the Sato mother-in law, Otowa. The Sato wives were immortalized in an undated scroll that hangs in Ioji Temple, which was constructed in honor of the fallen Sato warriors. The artwork depicts the widows in full armor, presented before their mother-in-law, Otowa, who is pleased with this tribute of devotion and loyalty to her slain sons.

Folk history venerates these women as examples of honor as "some variations of the story portray them [the widows] as actual warriors who donned the armor to fight and seek revenge, rather than as merely an act of memorialization."²⁰ Author Stephen Turnbull stated, "At no time did a samurai's wife show herself in a better light as a brave warrior than when she faced the defeat of her clan, the fall of her castle, and the death of her husband."²¹ However, there has been no clear evidence that reveals whether the widows were simply grieving samurai wives or if the scroll's depiction illustrates the widows fulfilling their roles in a vengeful act of bereavement.

The Ikko-ikki

Feudal Japan was a time of fighting amongst the clans for political power. Social chaos and turbulence followed any change in the regional ruling powers, the *daimyo*, fueling rebellion amongst members of the bushi who had adopted True Pure-Land Buddhism. The Jodo-Shinshu teachings "promised an easy salvation for everyone who prayed to Amida Buddha, and...had a great appeal for the common people."²² "Hierarchical in organization and exceptionally militant,"²³ the sect attracted not only members of the *bushi*, but also "low-ranking samurai, village headmen, and small landowners [who] came together in a self-supporting alliance,"²⁴ known as *Ikko* (Single-Minded) *ikki* (league). Members of these alliances "were as a rule unrelated both where ties of kinship or vassalage were concerned. The group signed an oath of loyalty to a common cause, valid until the task had been accomplished."²⁵

Rioting was a common tactic utilized by *ikki* to maintain some sort of balancing influence over the provincial rulers of higher ranks. For instance, *Tsuchi-ikki* were those united to seek economic justice against heavy taxation and cancellation of inordinate debt. Conflict between *ikki* and feudal provincial government was so common that "just as every member of Jodo-Shinshu shared fully in its peacetime activities, so did they share in the responsibilities when conflict loomed."²⁶ It was logical to accept that women were, at the very least, taught defensive skills to protect their families or even basic combative tactics with weapons and "certainly by the 1580s, the experience of a century of war had taught them that if they lost to a samurai army, a massacre of every member of the community would follow."²⁷

An *Ou Eikei Gunki* account explained how a force of female *ikki* combatants successfully defended Omori Castle against a warring landlord, in 1599, using a stone-throwing wooden tool:

Every single one of the two or three hundred women from inside the castle came out and began to throw down an abundance of large and small stones which they had already prepared, shouting as they defended, whereupon more than twenty men were suddenly hit and died. Many more were wounded. In fact, and regrettably, because of the women's act of opportunity in throwing stones, driven by necessity and scrambling to be first, they jumped into the moat and fled outside the palisade. This treatment inspired those within the castle. [Then] about twenty arquebuses opened fire. This was not enough to frighten [the women], and the throwing of small stones from the shadows of the moat was like a hailstorm. To the irritation of Shiyoshi, they struck Ishii Ukon Koremichi in both eyes and killed him. Similarly, they struck in one eye the horse that Kutsuzawa Goro was riding. Saying 'to stay too long in that place and be hit by women's stones would be a failure bringing ridicule for generations to come,' they returned to the original place of attack.²⁸

While it remains impossible to numerate the *onna-musha* who participated in battle, "women warriors were common enough that their presence did not elicit surprise or, for that matter, commentary"²⁹ T.D. Conlan postulated that gender was regarded less important than social rank; "Warrior women were treated virtually indistinguishably from their men. When Kamakura was sacked, many were butchered."³⁰ The record of the history of Japanese men of *bushi* class is extensive, bearing witness to contributions and military involvement of individuals and groups of significance. Reasonably, we expect an analogous amount of written or artistic evidence about the involvement or contributions

of women, contemporary with those historic events. However, this remains untrue.

Ukiyo-e woodblock prints illustrate women in battle, often presenting the women in full armor, wielding *naginata* (polearm), or a bow. The artists Yoshitoshi, Toyohara Chikanobu, and Katsukawa Shuntei represented Tomoe Gozen fighting in battle in nineteenth century prints. "Hangakujo," also by Yoshitoshi, was painted around 1885 and depicted Hangaku Gozen in full armour on a white horse. By the time of these productions, several centuries past the historical dates, both Tomoe and Hangaku Gozen were already legendary figures celebrated in early literature, traditional tales and Noh plays.

Confounding more accurate substantiation of these women was the production of artwork in which male *kabuki* actors depicted heroic female characters. It was common for artwork in the Tokugawa period to reflect culture of the time, "the kimono in its various forms has often been similar if not identical. Men and women are dressed exactly alike...sometimes even their hairdos are the same...there are pictures of young men (without shaved pates) and women who cannot be distinguished one from another."³¹ Yoshitoshi's 1848 CE print, titled "Three actors in the roles of Wada Yoshimori, Tomoe Gozen, and Yamabuki," is one such example.

The depictions and accounts of these women warriors date back to the early eleventh century, yet direct evidence is extremely rare. Warring practices of feudal *daimyo* Oda Nobunaga, "a hard and ruthless campaigner,"³² utilized pillaging and raiding of defiant villages, temples and castles to seize control of new territory and expand regional rule. It is not far from logic to expect that countless records or narratives were destroyed in this process and thereby erased the original historical accounts of the *onna-musha*.

Additional studies will require utilization of alternative sources of primary evidence. For instance, newly unearthed archaeological specimens could be DNA tested to validate the presence of women in defense of castles and villages, or in combat on the feudal battlefields of Japan. Future research on these Japanese women warriors will hopefully yield more information that further enlightens modern historians about feudal events, feudal life, cultural changes and the fascinating achievements of simply exceptional women.

Notes

- ¹K. Friday, *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2012), 270.
- ²T.D. Conlan, *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan* (MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 128-9.
- ³Ibid, 129.
- ⁴S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 36.
- ⁵P.H. Varley, *Warriors of Japan as portrayed in the War Tales*. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 104.
- ⁶C. I. Mulhern, *Heroic with Grace* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 139.
- ⁷P.H. Varley, *Warriors of Japan as portrayed in the War Tales* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 104.
- ⁸C. I. Mulhern, *Heroic with Grace* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 146.
- ⁹C. I. Mulhern, *Heroic with Grace* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 141.
- ¹⁰S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 37.
- ¹¹C. I. Mulhern, *Heroic with Grace* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991), 147-8.
- ¹²Ibid, 148.
- ¹³M.R. Beard, *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1953), 65.
- ¹⁴M.R. Beard, *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1953), 72-73.
- ¹⁵M.R. Beard, *The Force of Women in Japanese History* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1953), 72-73.
- ¹⁶S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 38.
- ¹⁷S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 40.
- ¹⁸S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 40.
- ¹⁹S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 38.
- ²⁰S.R. Turnbull, *Samurai Women: 1184-1877* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 10.
- ²¹S.R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 148.
- ²²C. Blomberg, *The Heart of the Warrior* (Kent: Japan Library, Curzon Press Ltd., 1994), 99.

- ²³C. Blomberg, *The Heart of the Warrior* (Kent: Japan Library, Curzon Press Ltd., 1994), 99.
- ²⁴S.R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 150.
- ²⁵C. Blomberg, *The Heart of the Warrior* (Kent: Japan Library, Curzon Press Ltd., 1994), 99.
- ²⁶S.R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 150.
- ²⁷S.R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 151.
- ²⁸S.R. Turnbull, *The Samurai Swordsman: Master of War* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 152.
- ²⁹T.D. Conlan, *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan* (MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 129.
- ³⁰T.D. Conlan, *State of War: The Violent Order of Fourteenth-Century Japan* (MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 128.
- ³¹P.H. Varley, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 348.
- ³²P.H. Varley, *Japanese Culture* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 142.

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