

Samurai and Medieval Knights: Bonds and Sanctions

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Comparative history is always a good way of placing ourselves in time and space in relation to the chronological sequence of events. That holds as well when we consider the values and codes of the samurai and of the medieval knights. It should be said that the members of both institutions coexisted in time, though not in territory, through most of the Late Middle Ages.

The samurai arose as tax collectors of the Japanese Empire, around 930 AD — a few decades, therefore, before the beginning of the Late Middle Ages in Europe, which falls around the year 1000 with the consolidation of feudalism. Well after the appearance of those warriors, and during the Kamakura shogunate, many were assigned to protect the shōgun, in whose person resided the de facto military dictator of a country not then unified, and whose emperor reigned but did not govern. In the same way as the protectors of the shōguns, others were bound to the Japanese feudal lords, who, owing to the scarce means of communication, held more power over them than the former held over the emperors, who were politically and juridically silenced.

Now, the samurai code of honor was the *bushidō*, whose texts — and therefore whose interpretation — varied from domain to domain. Regardless of that, there were always implicit Buddhist, Shintō, or Confucian commandments between its lines, at the discretion of the feudal lords, to whom the samurai always owed absolute fidelity, even when that took the form of acts of sabotage between domains in the frequent wars that arose there. (In Europe, the beginning of this relation, which valued bonds of fealty above bonds of blood, was marked by the knight — who would become the recipient of the piece of land granted by the suzerain, and thus his vassal — rendering him homage: the bowing of the head, the joining of hands in prayer so as to ask for strength for the charge, the oath of fidelity by which his arms and skills were religiously consecrated, and finally the investiture of the land, sealed with a kiss on the cheek. The moral norms were always governed by the commandments of the Roman Catholic Church, spread across the European continent by its messengers, with final oversight belonging to the feudal lord, who was responsible for matters of justice within the fief.)

In order to fulfill their duties, the samurai sharpened their discernment through meditation, whereas the medieval knights — who, when not vassals themselves, were almost always chosen among the sons of vassals for the exercise of sacred functions, such as the rescue of their lord if imprisoned in another's castle — constantly practiced small inter-fief combats, without any real political threat, as a means of improvement in little wars of very low lethality, as well as in tournaments and duels, to the delight of hundreds from every class. In this way, too, the stability of feudalism was maintained through the imposition of collective fear.

If the samurai proved unable to fulfill their duties, especially in cases of violation of the *bushidō*, by themselves or by another, *harakiri* was suggested to them: suicide following the loss of honor, by a cut across the belly, bleeding until death. No political or religious authority was empowered to prevent this sanction. (Medieval knights who offended against the duties of fealty toward their suzerains were subject to the sanctions of those lords, as administrators of justice within the fiefs, or directly to those of

the Church, which dominated the whole territory of medieval Christendom — so that various penalties were possible, such as excommunication or torture, especially after the institution of the Inquisition in 1231, besides personal redemption through volunteering to fight in the Crusades.)

With the passing of the centuries, the functions of the samurai fell into disuse. The Ashikaga and Tokugawa shogunates came and went, the latter repositioning Edo — Tokyo — as the capital and unifying the empire, in a new era of splendor in customs and in the arts. (And the Late Middle Ages ended, in Europe, with the taking of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.)

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