

Abstract

During Japan's early medieval period (ca. 12th-15th C.), warriors adapted new strategies of cultural kinship and group identity. The standard narrative of the evolution of the warrior class states that warriors shifted from divided to unitary inheritance to maintain and defend their territories as Japan descended into civil war in the early fourteenth century. This dissertation argues that shifts toward consolidation and unigeniture were neither uniform nor universal, and that medieval warrior society provides valuable examples for the study of the flexibility of kinship. I assert that social structures were contingent upon a range of locally-specific imperatives including the natural environments in which groups were situated and the political and military contexts of their individual positions. By integrating local context with documentary analysis and readings of native practices on their own terms, this dissertation enhances our understanding of warrior society. A combination of social and enviro-historical approaches allows for a holistic view of warrior groups and the inclusion of premodern Japanese kinship in broader conversations about the nature of human interconnectivity.

I base my analysis on a comparison of two disparate warrior kin groups, the Nejime and the Nakano/Ichikawa, which had identical positions of land stewardship and controlled territories of roughly the same size. Each group left behind records of inheritance, military activity, and interfamilial legal battles that allow me to examine their relational structures in detail, and reveal distinct strategies of social organization. The pair of case studies that form the foundation of my analysis help us to take a more nuanced approach to the nature of social change, and lead me to refine systemic views of the warrior class in light of the flexibility and variability evident across its diverse population. I contend that warrior kinship involved a fluid and dynamic set of practices that defies broad categorization. Instead, I argue that warrior kin groups formed and reformed opportunistically and survived the chaos of the medieval period due to their adaptability, a deliberate feature that was the primary feature of medieval warrior kinship.