

The Mongol Invasions of Japan And The Fall Of The Kamakura Shogunate

In the 13th century, the Mongols, fierce warriors, ruled over China and Korea. After the Mongols conquered Korea, their thirst for territory and power was still not quenched. A figurative bull's-eye was placed upon Japan, a foreign land of mystery. Presided over by the Kamakura Shogunate, the Japanese samurai were as fierce as the Mongols, and lived by a code of honour known as bushido, which included committing ritual suicide, also known as seppuku, upon being dishonoured. The samurai ranked highly in the class system of Japan, and were both skilled and respected. ("Samurai") Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and the first foreign emperor of China during the Yuan dynasty, led the Mongols. ("Kublai Khan") In 1281, they set off to the archipelago, falsely confident in their success. The attacks, although unsuccessful, had effects that ultimately led to the decline of the Kamakura Shogunate.

The Kamakura Shogunate was a bakufu, which means "tent government". Because this shogunate followed the Heian era, many mark this as the end of Heian pattern of government. However, contrary to popular belief, the Heian system served as the framework for the bakufu. The Kamakura Shogunate's success did not entirely wipe out the Heian legacy. According to The Cambridge History of Japan, "the Heian pattern of government survived into the fourteenth century – to be

destroyed with the Kamakura bakufu rather than by it.” The leader of the Kamakura bakufu aimed to unify Japan rather than divide it, which would have led to more loss and struggle. “The Minamoto chieftain promised what had never before been contemplated: a regional security system that bypassed Kyoto and guaranteed the landed holdings of followers. The vision was revolutionary – and led ultimately to the creation of the Kamakura bakufu.” (Cambridge 53) The leader, Yoritomo, had a strategic plan. In order to create unity, he gained more control over the east by making the officers of that region work for him as his vassals. The Kamakura shogunate put extensive thought into the workings of their government, which was quite necessary as it was the first bakufu.

In 1266, Kublai Khan sent a message to the Emperor of Japan through Korea, which the Mongols controlled at the time. However, the messenger never reached Japan and returned to China empty-handed. When the Khan sent another message to Japan, the bakufu had to decide how to interpret the letter. Although it asked for peaceful relations with Japan, the wording could have been taken more ominously and the possibility of war with the Mongols was arising in the near future. Japan, at the time, lacked skill in international relations, which means that the Kamakura shogunate did not have the ability to assess international situations with confidence. The Kamakura ordered the vassals in the west of the island to ready themselves to defend Japan from attacks by the Mongols. The Mongols busied themselves with building enormous warships – the size of which had never been seen before. They set off to Japan with approximately 40,000 men in 300 large ships and 400 to 500 smaller ships. However, the Japanese had the capabilities of

mobilizing 400,000 men, which grossly outnumbered that of the Mongols. And while the Mongols had superior weaponry, including slings and much higher quality crossbows, the technical ability of the Japanese, especially the samurai, was quite underestimated by Kublai Khan. (Neumann 1168-69) The Mongols island-hopped from Korea, to Tsushima Island, to Iki Island, and finally, to the island of Japan. However, the Japanese had built walls that prevented the Mongols from docking. After the Mongols returned to Iki Island, Japanese defenders raided Mongol ships. A second Mongol fleet subsequently landed at Takashima. The first fleet joined the second fleet and several skirmishes occurred on the waters. However, a typhoon hit, driving the Mongols away. ("Mongol Invasions") This was called the "kamikaze" by the Japanese, which means the divine wind. The Japanese believed that this storm had been sent to protect them from the Mongols.

After the Mongols fled, the bakufu tried to deal with several problems. First and foremost, samurai had traditionally been given lands as reward for fighting and loyalty to the government. However, there were land shortages and the bakufu could not give land to all the warriors. The samurai became frustrated and loyalties weakened. The shogunate also took advantage of the moment in time to increase its power over Kyushu, an island. (Jansen) The lack of loyalty to the bakufu served to its demise when the imperial fighters destroyed the bakufu, capturing the city of Kamakura and causing the bakufu fighters to commit seppuku. (Cambridge 174)

The attempted invasions by the Mongols were ultimately unsuccessful, for several reasons. Underestimation of the Japanese played a big part, but the biggest factor was the "divine wind", the typhoon that caused them to flee the island.

However, the invasions overall had unexpected impacts upon the Kamakura shogunate. This was most likely because the Kamakura bakufu was the first government of its type, and was not technically official power. When they could not deliver on the rewards that should have been given to the samurai as compensation for essentially defeating the Mongols, the loyalty of the warriors weakened and the power that the bakufu wielded diminished as a result. The decline of the Kamakura bakufu took place in the 14th century, about 150 years after being put into place. After the bakufu fell apart, two bakufus were subsequently created; immediately following the Kamakura was the Muromachi. Although there were other factors that led to the demise of the shogunate, the Mongol invasions were one of the most pertinent.

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