

## Chapter 1

# Masakado and His Legacy

The history we read, though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments.

—Geoffrey Baraclough, *History in a Changing World*

Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.

—Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*

On the twenty-fifth day of the second month of 940, according to the old lunar calendar,<sup>\*</sup> the capital was all atwitter with the news that Taira Masakado, the warrior rebel who had held the city and the imperial court in terror for the past two months, was dead—slain twelve days earlier in battle with imperial forces led by Fujiwara Hidesato and Masakado's kinsman Taira Sadamori. Ten days later, official dispatches from Hidesato and from the provinces of Kai and Shinano confirmed the news.<sup>1</sup>

Excitement, anticipation, and anxiety intensified over the next few weeks as further messengers reported that Hidesato and Sadamori were on their way to Kyoto, and rumors that Masakado's warriors were

---

<sup>\*</sup>Until the late nineteenth century, the Japanese used a lunar calendar that featured twelve unnamed months of twenty-nine or thirty days each. The year began later than it does in the modern Gregorian calendar, with New Year's Day falling between January 21 and February 19. The twenty-fifth day of the second month of 940 would thus correspond to April 5 in the Gregorian calendar. I have followed the convention of converting years to the Gregorian equivalents but have left months and days in the lunar calendar format.

marching on the city to avenge their master swirled through the streets. In the end, however, the rumors proved baseless. Nearly two hundred of Masakado's core followers had died with him, and the rest of his men and allies scattered or were tracked down and killed in a matter of weeks. The court breathed a collective sigh of relief and sat back to discuss appropriate rewards for the victors, while Kyoto waited eagerly for the arrival of Masakado's head.<sup>2</sup>

The gruesome custom of gathering enemy heads after a battle (*bun-tori*, literally "taking one's share") became common practice in Japan at least as early as the seventh century, when the imperial state (*ritsuryō*) legal codes laid out a flexible point system for assessing battlefield merit and awarding promotions in rank. "Points," explained the Statute on Military Defense (*Gunbōryō*), "have no fixed meaning. In one year's battles one point may require the taking of ten heads, while in another year's fighting five heads can make a point."<sup>3</sup>

By the tenth century, warfare and law enforcement had become the preserve of professional warriors who fought for rewards for their services paid by the government or private employers. Recompense, however, required proof of success, making careful accounting and confirmation of one's kills a matter of considerable importance. Warriors concocted numerous devices toward this end, ranging from marking arrows with their names to commissioning illustrated accounts of their exploits, but the cardinal warrior trophies throughout Japan's premodern epoch were the heads of those they were contracted to run down. Heads were severed in the heat of battle, usually by means of a warrior's short sword (*katana*), or in the aftermath, as a substitute for live prisoners when capture or transport of the latter was impractical. Heads collected in accord with government warrants were assembled, identified, marked with the names of their former owners, and brought to the capital for inspection. Those belonging to important criminals were paraded through the streets and placed on public display.<sup>4</sup>

Hidesato and Sadamori reached the capital on the tenth day of the fifth month of 940 and entered the city through the Rashōmon gate to the south, where they were met by envoys from the Office of Imperial Police (*Kebiishi-chō*). The heads of Masakado and his men had previously been marked with red tags attached to the topknots and packed in salt to preserve them for transport to Kyoto. Now they were removed from

the packing material, impaled on the tips of spears, and paraded northward up Suzaku Grand Avenue, while on both sides of the route “the carts and horses of high and low gathered like clouds” to watch the spectacle. An Imperial Police officer in full armor and on horseback led the procession, bearing a brightly colored banner announcing Masakado and his crimes. Behind him followed five armored foot soldiers carrying Masakado’s head and guarding it with bared spears. Next rode Hidesato and Sadamori, also in full armor, but without their helmets so that they might be more easily recognized. And behind them came three or four dozen mounted warriors and foot soldiers who served Hidesato and Sadamori, followed by other Imperial Police officers, bearing the heads of the rest of Masakado’s lieutenants. The parade ended outside the gate to the East Market, where Masakado’s head was ceremoniously hung from a tree for display.<sup>5</sup> (See the illustrations on pages 86–87.)

Reliable historical records have little further to say about Masakado’s remains. But popular rumors and legends, which had found their way into print by the early medieval period, relate that his was no ordinary head. For three months, they say, it hung outside the East Market, its eyes never closing and its color remaining unchanged, while in the evenings “it gnashed its teeth and wailed, ‘Where is my mortal form, that which was cut away? Come to me, that this head might do battle once again.’ And all who heard it trembled in fear.” This howling continued night after night until one passerby at last had the presence of mind to answer it, reminding Masakado where he was and how he got there. At that, the now-chastened head grinned wistfully, sighed, closed its eyes, and fell silent.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly thereafter, however, Masakado’s head was once again in search of its missing body, this time breaking free of the tree from which it had been hung and flying off toward Masakado’s home in the East. One account relates that along the way an attendant of the Nangū shrine, in what is now Gifu prefecture, shot it with an arrow. Today the spot at which the head fell is marked by a small shrine called the Okashira Jinja (“Shrine of the Honorable Head”) in a village called Yadōri (“Arrow Path”). Prayers offered there are said to be especially efficacious for curing ailments of the head and neck.<sup>7</sup>

But the most famous accounts of Masakado’s head indicate that it did not stop its journey after being shot in Gifu. Instead it continued on until

it exhausted its remaining strength and came to rest near a small temple in a village called Shibazaki, in what would eventually become the Ōtemachi district of Tokyo. As it landed, the ground rumbled and the sky darkened, terrifying the local villagers, who washed the head and buried it on the grounds of the Kanda Myōjin shrine. Ten years later, in the ninth month of 950, an eerie cry issued from this grave site, the darkness was rendered by a flash of light, and a strange warrior appeared—and then vanished. The locals thereafter attended to Masakado as a potentially dangerous spirit and conducted rites to keep him pacified. By the late thirteenth century, this tomb had apparently fallen into disrepair, and Masakado's spirit was said to have been voicing its displeasure by causing one natural disaster after another. In 1305 a visiting priest had the grave site restored and bestowed the Buddhist name Hasuamida-butsu on Masakado, engraving this sobriquet on a stone stele that he erected next to the tomb. After that, the calamities ceased—at least for a while.<sup>8</sup>

When Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa Shogun, established his headquarters in Edo (now called Tokyo), Kanda Myōjin was moved to its present location in nearby Chiyoda ward, but Masakado's ancient grave, which had come to be known as the Kubizuka (“tomb of the head”), was left in its original spot, on what then became the estate of the Sakai, a prominent *daimyo* house. In 1868 the last Tokugawa shogun resigned, ostensibly returning power to the emperor. This event, known as the Meiji Restoration, marked the beginning of Japan's modern era. It also marked the beginning of new tales of troubles spawned by Masakado's restless spirit.

The new regime tore down the Sakai mansion in 1871 and erected offices for the Ministry of Finance on the site, but the Masakado Kubizuka was left in place on the grounds. Oda Kan'e's 1908 account describes Kubizuka as having, at that time, consisted of an earthen mound just under 7 meters high and about 30 meters in circumference, standing just to the southwest of a lily pond in front of the main entrance to the ministry offices. About 2 meters east of the mound stood a 2-meter by 3-meter foundation stone adorned with a garden lantern, on which, Oda contended, “there can be no doubting once stood” the stele (which had apparently disappeared sometime during the Tokugawa period) bearing Masakado's Buddhist name, Hasuamida-butsu.<sup>9</sup>

In 1874, just prior to the Meiji emperor's visit to Kanda Myōjin, the government issued a formal declaration condemning Masakado as having been "an enemy of the emperor" and ending Masakado's status as a principal divinity at the shrine.<sup>10</sup> Oddly enough, Masakado appears to have taken this insult in stride, for no significant troubles were reported to have followed immediately. But during the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, the Ministry of Finance offices burned to the ground and the Kubizuka site was seriously damaged. Ministry officials took advantage of this opportunity to excavate the site but found only an empty stone chamber. Determining that Masakado's head had probably never been there at all, the ministry filled the pond, razed the site, and put up a temporary office building over it. That, however, soon proved to have been a poor decision.

Construction workers and ministry officials began dropping like proverbial flies. Within two years, fourteen had died—including the minister of finance, Sasoku Seiji, himself—and large numbers of others suffered falls and other accidents in the new building. As rumors spread that Masakado's vengeful spirit was behind the troubles (the majority of the maladies involved the feet, lending credibility to gossip that blamed the victims for treading on Masakado's grave!), the ministry at length decided, in 1928, to tear down the buildings and restore the Kubizuka. Morita Shigetani, the chief attendant to Kanda Myōjin, was engaged to hold a pacification rite (*ireisai*), attended by the new minister, Mitsuji Chūzō, and large numbers of other ministry officials.<sup>11</sup>

On June 20, 1940, very nearly a thousand years to the day following Masakado's death, the Communications Ministry offices were struck by lightning. The resulting fire spread rapidly through Ōtemachi, burning down nine government offices, including the Ministry of Finance. Jumping once again to the obvious conclusion, Kawada Retsu, the minister of finance, swiftly summoned attendants from Kanda Myōjin to perform another pacification rite and had the foundation stone that had been removed after the 1923 earthquake rebuilt. For good measure, he also restored the stone stele bearing the name Hasuamida-butsu. A few months later, the Ministry of Finance moved its offices to Kasumigaseki, a few kilometers to the southwest, and the land surrounding Kubizuka became the property of the Tokyo municipal government.<sup>12</sup>

Allied air raids on Tokyo during the war virtually leveled Ōtemachi,

but the Kubizuka site somehow survived amid the wreckage. In 1945, however, the Occupation forces decided to build a large motor pool garage on the site. But as construction began, one of the bulldozers struck the Kubizuka foundation stone and overturned suddenly, killing its operator. Ōtemachi ward chief Endō Seizō hastened to SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) headquarters with a delegation of neighborhood residents to explain the importance of Masakado's tomb and succeeded in persuading Occupation authorities to cancel their building plans and to cooperate in the restoration of the site. In 1970 a person or persons unknown made off with Masakado's



The Kubizuka today

stele, later returning it broken into three pieces. To avoid further wrath from Masakado, the monument was hurriedly recarved. The following year, the Tokyo government declared the site a municipal cultural treasure. And in 1984, in response to public pressure arising from a Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) television series on Masakado, he was restored to his position as a principal divinity enshrined at Kanda Myōjin.<sup>13</sup>

While Ōtemachi has once again grown up around the Kubizuka site, stories abound of the lengths to which surrounding companies will go to appease Masakado's spirit—and the penalties some have suffered for failing to do so. Mitsui Finance Corporation's sudden bankruptcy in 2002, for example, is commonly attributed to plans to sell mineral rights to the land under the site. Most of the companies in the neighborhood contribute to the upkeep of the monument, some require employees to make regular pilgrimages to Kubizuka and/or to Kanda Myōjin, and many take pains to arrange office desks so that no one sits with his or her back facing Masakado's grave.<sup>14</sup>

## Masakado in History

Taira Masakado is perhaps the most famous samurai you've never heard of. Celebrated as a populist hero, denounced as a rebel and a state criminal, or feared as an avenging spirit, he is the subject of national history, folklore, literary imagination, and local legends passed down in more than three hundred fifty places across Japan. Stories about him appear in some forty-five medieval or early modern literary works, as well as hundreds of modern books, articles, and novels. A score or more of Shintō shrines claim to be burial sites for parts of his body—his head, torso, hands, or the like—or to house bits of the armor he wore or the weapons he carried when he died.<sup>15</sup>

Such enduring fascination with a tenth-century warrior chieftain is less strange than it may seem at first consideration, for Masakado's story is operatic in its themes of fate and destiny: The scion of a prominent noble lineage and “a descendent, in the fifth generation, of Emperor Kashiwabara,” Masakado served the imperial court in the capital as a youth, then settled down to the life of a country gentleman in the

provinces of eastern Japan, to the northeast of modern-day Tokyo. His troubles began in 935, when he was suddenly attacked—ambushed—by another prominent local warrior, Minamoto Tasuku, at a place called Nomoto, near the convergence of Hitachi, Shimozuke, Musashi, and Shimōsa provinces. The nature of Tasuku's grudge against Masakado is hazy, but his decision to pursue it in the field set in motion a complex and momentous chain of events. Within months, Masakado found himself embroiled in conflicts with several of his kinsmen, led by his paternal uncle and father-in-law, Taira Yoshikane. Yoshikane, who was Tasuku's brother-in-law, had (so goes the tale) been at odds with Masakado since 931, "owing to a trifling quarrel over a woman."<sup>16</sup>

For the next four years, Masakado managed to keep his squabbles within the boundaries of imperial law, but in the eleventh month of that year, his fortunes took a radical turn when he entered Hitachi province at the head of a thousand troops, ostensibly to plead with the provincial government on behalf of one of his followers. Whatever his intentions might have been in leading armed men into Hitachi, he ended by attacking and occupying the provincial government headquarters. With this action, he crossed the proverbial line: no longer just a (for-the-most-part) law-abiding provincial warrior drawn into a feud with local rivals, he was now in rebellion against the state.

Seeing no avenue of retreat, Masakado chose instead to surge forward, seizing, in rapid succession, the provincial government headquarters of Shimozuke, Kōzuke, Musashi, Kazusa, Awa, Sagami, Izu, and Shimōsa. Then, according to most versions of the story, he threw down the most direct challenge to the authority of the imperial throne in three centuries—and the most direct that would be offered for four centuries hence—declaring himself the New Emperor, and setting about building a new capital near his home and appointing officials to staff his new court.

But his reign as New Emperor was to be short-lived. Within a month of his assumption of the title, the court had issued edicts calling for his destruction and commissioned several warrior notables—including Sadamori and Hidesato—for this task. Thus, on the fourteenth day of the second month of 940, "the punishment of Heaven descended upon Masakado." As he squared off against government forces in northwestern Shimōsa, "his horse forgot how to gallop as the wind in flight; the



man lost his skills. Struck by an arrow from the gods, in the end the New Emperor perished alone, like Ch'ih Yu battling on the plain of Cho-lu.”★

Masakado's insurrection ranks among the most dramatic episodes in the early history of the samurai. Coinciding with earthquakes, rainbows, and lunar eclipses in the capital, uprisings in the north, and pirate disturbances in the west, it threw the court and the capital into a panic and earned Masakado the worst sort of moralizing opprobrium. An edict issued by the Council of State, for example, intoned:

Since creation this court has seen many rebellions, but none that compare to this. Now and again there have been those who yearn with treasonous spirit, but such meet always with the calamity of obliteration. The Heavenly Sovereign shall visit upon this Masakado the punishment of Heaven!<sup>17</sup>

In this same vein, the most important source for information on the events of 935–940, a chronicle titled *Shōmonki* (“The Masakado Records”), ends melodramatically with a report from Masakado suffering in hell:

Masakado now dwells in the village of the Eight Difficulties, in the town of the Five Modes of Existence, in the district of the Six Ways of Rebirth, in the province of the Three Realms. Nevertheless, an envoy from the Transitional Realm reported these words:<sup>†</sup>

“While I dwelt on the earthly plane I did not one good deed, and for this wicked karma I spin through evil incarnations. At this very moment 15,000 souls indict me—how painful that is! When I did evil deeds, I gathered followers and through them committed my crimes. But on the day of judgment, I took on all my sins, and suffer alone. My body has been cast into the Forest of

---

★Ch'ih Yu was a rebel from Chinese mythology who met his end in a battle with the illustrious Yellow Emperor near Cho-lu, a plain in Hopei province. Quotations from *Konjaku monogatari shū* 25.1; *Shōmonki*, p. 129.

†Masakado's address in the next world follows the format of more mundane Japanese addresses, with place names drawn from important Buddhist concepts and principles.

Sword-leaf Trees and made to suffer, while my liver roasts over coals in an iron box. . . . My courage in life brought me no honor after death. In reward for my arrogance I have gained only bountiful suffering.”<sup>18</sup>

All the same, Masakado’s reputation was rehabilitated quickly. *Shōmonki*, our most expansive record of Masakado’s adventures, is thought to have been completed sometime shortly after Masakado’s insurrection ended—perhaps as early as a few months later—and is certain to have been finished sometime prior to 1099, the date recorded on the oldest surviving copy.<sup>19</sup> Intended for a court audience, the chronicle harshly condemns Masakado’s actions after 939, but it also treats him sympathetically throughout, portraying him as a victim of circumstances and poor choices rather than as an evil man per se.

By medieval times, Masakado had become literally larger than life. He was now thought to have been, as one text put it, a man “the likes of which the world has seldom known. He stood over seven feet tall, his corporeal form was all of iron, and he had two pupils in his left eye.”<sup>20</sup>

The idea that Masakado’s body was made of iron—that he was indestructible—rapidly evolved into a belief that, like Achilles some two millennia earlier, he had but a single weak spot and that Hidesato’s discovery of this secret (betrayed to him by one of Masakado’s consorts) was the real cause of his doom. The location of Masakado’s vulnerable point varies from tale to tale. Some legends give it as being his temple, while others identify it as his forehead, between his eyes, or his right eye. One particularly colorful version of the story relates that his mother had been a giant serpent, who made him invulnerable by licking him all over his body shortly after birth. Unfortunately for Masakado, however, she somehow neglected to lick the very top of his head, leaving that as his one point of weakness.<sup>21</sup>

## The First Samurai

Masakado has long captured the imaginations of historians, as well as those of the general public in Japan. His life and his insurrection mark the advent of an era: the coming of age of the order of professional

fighting men in the capital and countryside that we know as the *bushi* or *samurai*. The records concerning Masakado's misadventures are among the first in which this warrior order can be clearly seen—the first that confirm if not its maturity, certainly its adolescence. Many of the weapons and tools that became characteristic of samurai for the remainder of the classical and early medieval epochs—the curved sword (*tachi*), the open platform stirrups, the saddles, the bridles, the *ōyoro*i and *haramaki* styles of armor, the antlered, sweeping-brimmed helmets—were developed around Masakado's time.

The warbands led by Masakado and his adversaries were raised, organized, and bound together in a manner that would characterize samurai military forces for the next three hundred years. The strategies and tactics they employed reflected the political, economic, and social structure of Masakado's world, as well as the priorities, ethics, and values that shaped Japanese warfare until modern times. And the court's methods of dealing with Masakado, his enemies, and his crimes illustrate the key principles and practices of the state's military and police system, along with the methods and the dynamics through which the civil nobility managed and dominated warriors for more than three centuries.

Masakado was not, of course, literally the first samurai. That warrior order emerged gradually over the course of the ninth and early tenth centuries in response to changing military needs and accompanying reforms to the state's military and police system.<sup>22</sup> The *ritsuryō* military system, the system of the imperial state, had been designed in the late seventh century, in the face of internal challenges to the sovereignty of the court and the regime, and the growing might of Tang China, which had been engaged since the early 600s in one of the greatest military expansions in Chinese history.

Most of Japan at that time was controlled by a confederation of great houses, among which one—the royal, or Yamato, house—stood as a kind of first among equals. Some of the other houses were entirely dependent on the Yamato for their positions, but the majority had their own geographic bases of power, which they ruled with considerable autonomy. In theory, these regional chieftains drew their titles from the court, but in practice, their positions were permanent, hereditary, and only nominally related to the king's authority. In fact, the principal role of the royal court—and of the countrywide polity—was little more than to

serve as a vehicle for cooperation among the great houses in matters of “national” concern. All of that changed—rapidly, fundamentally, and sometimes dramatically—during the seventh century, as this polity gave way to a centralized imperial regime.<sup>23</sup>

The changeover accelerated after the sixth month of 645, when a radical clique led by the future Emperor Tenji seized power by hacking their political opponents to pieces with swords and spears in the midst of a court ceremony. In the wake of this spectacular coup d'état, Tenji and his supporters introduced a series of centralizing measures collectively known as the Taika Reforms, after the calendar era in which the first were launched. Over the next few decades, the great regional powers were stripped of their independent bases and converted to true officials of the state, while the Yamato sovereigns were restyled in the image of Chinese emperors: transcendent repositories of all political authority.

The reformers succeeded through an esoteric combination of cajolery, cooptation, and coercion, aided in no small measure by widespread apprehension over the very real—or so it seemed at the time—threat of a Chinese attack on the homeland. Specters of Tang invasion fleets looming over the horizon served to mute opposition to losses of local or hereditary privilege and to promote support for state-strengthening reforms, as central and provincial noble houses set aside their differences in the face of a perceived common enemy. For it was obvious to all concerned that the Yamato military organization was far from equal to the task of fending off the Tang.<sup>24</sup>

“National armies” of the confederation era were knit together from forces raised independently by the various noble houses, who then led them into battle under the banner of the Yamato sovereign. Recruitment, training, and mobilization varied from province to province—and sometimes from conflict to conflict. So did organization and control. Overall command of the army was also eclectic and sometimes divided between multiple “Supreme Commanders.”<sup>25</sup>

The post-Taika military structure placed the whole of the state's military resources—weapons, auxiliary equipment, horses, troops, and officers—under the direct control of the emperor and his court. Henceforth, centrally appointed officers and officials oversaw all military units and activities, and direct conscription—supervised by the imperial court—replaced enlistment of troops through provincial chieftains.

Under the new system, all free male subjects between the ages of twenty and fifty-nine, other than rank-holding nobles and individuals who “suffered from long-term illness or were otherwise unfit for military duty,” were liable for induction as soldiers, or *heishi*.<sup>26</sup> Conscripts were enrolled in provincial regiments (*gundan*), which were militia units, akin to modern national guards. Once assigned and registered as soldiers, most men returned to their homes and fields. Provincial governors maintained copies of regimental rosters, which they used as master lists from which to select troops for training; for peacetime police, guard, and frontier garrison duties; and for service in wartime armies.

The model for the *ritsuryō* military system was Tang China, which is hardly surprising in light of the concerns that inspired it. Contrary to the images that still dominate many popular histories, however, the new institutions—like the rest of the imperial state structure—were not simply adopted wholesale. The architects of the imperial state carefully adapted Chinese practices to meet Japanese needs and circumstances. At the same time, the planners all too often contended with conflicting priorities and accordingly incorporated some rather unhappy compromises into the final product. The original foibles of the system were, moreover, exacerbated by changing conditions: by the mid-eighth century the needs and priorities of the Japanese state differed considerably from those of the late seventh.

One of the difficulties the government faced was enforcing its conscription laws. Under the imperial state polity, military conscription was simply one of many kinds of labor tax, and induction rosters were compiled from the same population registers that were used to levy all other forms of tax. For this reason, peasant efforts to evade any of these taxes also placed them beyond the reach of the conscription authorities.

Far more important than the reluctance of peasants to serve in the military, however, were the fundamental tactical limitations of the *ritsuryō* armies. Like their Tang archetypes, the regiments that formed the backbone of Japanese imperial armies were mixed weapons-system forces: predominantly infantry but augmented by heavily armored archers on horseback. This infantry-heavy balance was the product of both design and necessity.

The architects of the *ritsuryō* polity seized on large-scale direct mobilization of the peasantry as a key part of the answer to both of the

perceived threats that concerned them (a Chinese invasion and regional insurrections led by the old provincial chieftains). The system they created enabled the court to corner the market on military manpower—incorporating all or most of the bodies that could be drawn off to serve as soldiers into the state’s armed forces—and to create loyalist armies of daunting volume, thereby effectively closing the door on military challenges to imperial power or authority. An army of imposing numbers was also, of course, precisely what would have been needed to fend off a foreign invasion, while a militia structure made it possible for a tiny country like Japan to muster large-scale fighting forces when necessary, without bankrupting its economic and agricultural base as a large standing army would have.

But the court had opted for size at the expense of the elite technology of the age, choosing, as a matter of logistical necessity, a military force composed primarily of infantry. The problem, however, was that the premier military technology of the day was mounted archery, not foot soldiers.

The state did try to maintain as large a cavalry force as it could, but efforts to that end ran afoul of major logistical difficulties. Foremost among these was the simple truth that fighting from horseback, particularly with bows and arrows, demanded complex skills that required years of training and practice to master. It was just not practical to attempt to develop first-rate cavalymen from short-term peasant conscripts. The court addressed this problem through the straightforward expedient of staffing its cavalry units only with men who had acquired basic competence at mounted archery on their own, prior to induction.

This policy had far-reaching consequences for the shape of military things to come in Japan. It meant, first, that only a small portion of the imperial armies could be cavalry. It also meant that the cavalry would be composed solely of the scions of elite elements of Japanese society. For if the prerequisite to becoming a cavalryman was skill with bow and horse, cavalrymen could come only from families that kept horses, a practice that did not spread beyond the nobility and the very top tiers of the peasantry until the tenth century or later.

None of this mattered a great deal initially: the *ritsuryō* military structure was more than adequate to the tasks for which it was designed. But

by the middle decades of the eighth century, the political climate—domestic and foreign—had changed enough to render the provincial regiments anachronistic and superfluous in most of the country.

The Chinese invasion that the Japanese had so feared simply never materialized. Whatever real peril there might have been ended by the late 670s, when the kingdom of Silla forced the Tang out of the Korean peninsula and checked its eastward expansion. Later, a rebellion (lasting from 756 to 763) by a Turkish general named An Lu-shan shook the Tang dynasty to its foundations, making it abundantly clear to the Japanese that the danger of Chinese warships approaching their shores was past. The likelihood of violent challenges to the central polity from the regional nobility had also dwindled rapidly, as former provincial chieftains came to accept the imperial state structure as the arena in which they would compete for power and influence. The passing of these crises all but ended the need to field large armies and prompted the court to begin restructuring its armed forces.

In the frontiers—particularly in the north, where the state was pursuing an aggressive war of occupation—large infantry units still served a useful function. But the martial needs of the interior provinces, the vast majority of the country, quickly pared down to the capture of criminals and similar policing functions. Unwieldy infantry units based on the provincial regiments were just not well suited to this type of work. The sort of military forces most called for now were small, highly mobile squads that could be assembled and sent out to pursue raiding bandits with a minimum of delay. In the meantime, diminishing military need for the regiments encouraged officers and provincial officials to misuse the conscripts who manned them—borrowing them, for example, for free labor on their personal homes and properties.

The court responded to these challenges with a series of adjustments, amendments, and general reforms. The pattern of edicts issued from the 730s onward indicates that the government had reached the conclusion that it was more efficient—and cheaper as well—to rely on privately trained and equipped elites than to continue to attempt to draft and train the general population. Accordingly, troops mustered from the peasantry played smaller and smaller roles in state military planning, while the role of elites expanded steadily throughout the eighth century. The

provincial regiments were first supplemented by new types of forces and then, in 792, eliminated entirely in all but a handful of provinces. In their place the court created a series of new military posts and titles that legitimized the use of personal martial resources on behalf of the state. In essence, the court moved from a conscripted, publicly trained military force to one composed of professional mercenaries.

These measures served to make the acquisition of martial skills an attractive path to personal advancement for provincial elites and low-ranking central aristocrats. In the meantime, expansive social and political changes taking shape in Japan during the ninth and tenth centuries spawned intensifying competition for wealth and influence among the premier noble houses of the court, which in turn led to a private market for military resources, arising in parallel to the one generated by government policies. State and personal needs thus intersected to create broadening avenues to personal success for those with military talents.

From the late eighth century, skill at arms increasingly offered ambitious young men a means to get their feet in the door for careers in government service or in the service of some powerful aristocrat in the capital. The greater such opportunities became, the more enthusiastically and the more seriously such young men committed themselves to the profession of arms. The samurai thus came into being as an order of mercenaries in the capital and the provinces, for whom military service represented a means to broader—"civilian"—career ends.

By the middle of the ninth century, perhaps as early as the late eighth, fighting men in the provinces had also begun to form themselves into privately organized martial bands. By the third decade of the tenth century, private military networks of substantial scale had begun to appear, centered on major provincial warriors like Masakado, who, we are told, could charge into battle "leading many thousands of warriors," each himself leading "followers as numerous as the clouds."<sup>27</sup>

Although the government initially opposed such networks, it soon came to realize that they could be useful in filling a gap created in the state military system by the dismantling of the *ritsuryō* regiments in 792. For without the regiments, the court had no formal mechanism by which to call up troops when it needed them. During the early tenth century, however, it began to co-opt private military organizations to provide just such a mechanism, now transferring much of the responsibility



for mustering and organizing the forces necessary for carrying out military assignments to warrior leaders, who could in turn delegate much of that responsibility to their own subordinates.

Thus by Masakado's day, Japan was ruled by a government that, outwardly at least, lacked both an army and a police force. Without troops of its own, the court turned instead to private forces directed by private warriors for its martial dirty work. And, as most readers are no doubt aware, the descendants—both genealogical and institutional—of these warriors became the political masters of Japan's medieval and early modern epochs. Juxtaposed in this fashion, these two developments suggest an appalling shortsightedness or naïveté on the part of the court nobility, which would seem to have adopted military policies tantamount, in the words of one popular author, to “sowing dragon's teeth.” This led, inexorably, to the court falling under the domination of its own military servants.<sup>28</sup>

In this light, Masakado's insurrection—which, in the conventional reckoning, culminated in his proclaiming himself emperor over an independent new state in the east—seems eerily like a harbinger of things to come, a presage of the Gempei War of the 1180s, the Jōkyū War of 1221, and the Nambokuchō wars of the late fourteenth century, which, step by step, ushered in the medieval era of warrior rule. And, indeed, that is precisely the way historians have traditionally cast the events of the 930s.

But there are numerous problems with this scenario, not the least of which are the rather inconvenient facts that Masakado was not able to break free of court control and that he was brought down by other samurai. Even more important—and more telling—the first successful steps toward warrior autonomy and political power came nearly two and a half centuries after Masakado's death, and real samurai rule was yet another two centuries in the making after that.

These gaps are awkward and difficult to explain in the context of traditional assumptions about Masakado's insurrection: If provincial warriors, who by the mid-900s already constituted the government's only significant military forces, began a struggle to break free from court political control in the tenth century, why did it take them so long—nearly four hundred years!—to achieve this goal?

The short answer is that the rise of the warrior class as a political and economic power is a tale of the thirteenth through the sixteenth

centuries, not the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. Masakado's career and circumstances were typical of his class; he was an exemplar of his age, not a pale foreshadowing of the medieval future.

As the following chapters will reveal, a careful look at Masakado's insurrection illuminates both the structure and the inherent stability of his social and political world. Court supervision of the provinces became less direct than it had once aspired to be, and local freedom of action expanded. But the core premises of the imperial state persisted, and the bonds between capital and countryside endured.