

Article and Questions

Read the article and answer the questions.

This article was published in 2022 when the NHK broadcast “The 13 Samurais Supporting the Lord Kamakura”.

According to textbooks, Hojo Yoshitoki is “the younger brother of Hojo Masako and regent of the Kamakura shogunate at the time of the Jokyū Rebellion. In my opinion, however, Hojo Yoshitoki was “the man who completed the Kamakura shogunate and, by extension, samurai government.

When was the Kamakura shogunate established in the first place?

Older people may have learned the phrase “**Let's build a good country (1192), Kamakura Shogunate**”. Those who are a little more familiar with history may say, “Recently, it has been changed to Iihako (1185) instead of Iikuni (1192).

The year 1192 was the year Minamoto no Yoritomo was appointed Seiin Taishogun (barbarian general). Since the head of the shogunate is usually the Seiin Taishogun, it is not hard to understand why the shogunate was established in this year. However, the understanding that the head of the shogunate is the barbarian general, and that the shogunate can be established only after the barbarian general is appointed to the post, is a later development.

Yoritomo actually resigned from the position of Seiin Taishogun around 1194 (although the Imperial Court apparently did not approve of his resignation). Did this mean that Yoritomo was no longer the head of the Kamakura shogunate? Did the Kamakura shogunate cease to exist?

Of course not. The Kamakura Shogunate could exist without a barbarian general, and even if he resigned as a barbarian general, Yoritomo would still be the “Lord Kamakura,” in

other words, the head of the Kamakura Shogunate.

When Minamoto no Yoritomo died in 1199, his heir, Yoriye, succeeded him. However, it was not until 1202 that Yoriye was appointed as a barbarian general. Did the Shogunate not exist during that period?

Of course not. **Yoriye's position as successor to Yoritomo was approved by the Imperial Court immediately after Yoritomo's death.** Yoriye succeeded to the position of Lord Kamakura upon Yoritomo's death, and **his appointment as a barbarian general was not mandatory.**

What then is “iihako”? This refers to the so-called “Bunji Imperial Decree” of 1185.

A textbook explanation follows. After the fall of the Heike clan in 1185, Minamoto no Yoritomo and his younger brother, Yoshitsune, came into conflict with each other. At Yoritomo's request, Hōhō Go-Shirakawa ordered the destruction of Yoshitsune.

Yoritomo then had the Imperial Court authorize him to place guardians (守護) and landowners (地頭) in the manors and official domains of various countries in order to search for and arrest Yoshitsune. This is called the “Bunji Imperial Decree. This is what you must have learned in high school.

The system of guardians and landowners was the basis of the Kamakura Shogunate's nationwide rule. Therefore, the “iihako” theory considers 1185, the year in which the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate was approved by the Imperial Court, as the year in which the shogunate was established.

However, contemporaneous historical documents on the Bunji Imperial Decree are scarce, and in fact, the content of the authority that Yoritomo acquired at this time is unclear.

Indeed, the *Azuma Kagami*, a history of the Kamakura Shogunate, states that the establishment of a governor and landowner was authorized. However, since “*Azuma Kagami*” was written more than 100 years after the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate, its statements cannot be fully trusted. At the very least, the historical community is in common agreement that the position of “guardian” had not been established at this point in time.

According to the “*Tamahaba*,” the diary of Kujo Kanemitsu, a contemporaneous historical document, the outline of the Bunji Imperial Decree was as follows,

1. The five provinces of the Ginki, San'in, San'yo, Nankai, and Saikai were to be divided among the warriors under Yoritomo's command.
2. Authorize Yoritomo to collect 5 square kilograms of rice for food in each of the provinces, regardless of whether the provinces were under the jurisdiction of a manor or a feudal lord.
3. He also granted Yoritomo the right to govern the rice paddies in each province.
4. The authority to appoint officials in each province, manor governors, and deputy governors was granted to Yoritomo.

The above description is very brief and vague. When Yoritomo gave the lands (Tokaido, Tosando, and Hokurikudo were already in his sphere of influence) to the warriors, he could not have meant to give them all the lands in Japan (that would mean that the lands of court nobles and temples and shrines would be lost).

It is not clear what specific rights Yoritomo received. For this reason, there has long been a dispute in academic circles as to what authority Yoritomo obtained.

The authority that Yoritomo acquired at this time was only for a limited time in order to pursue Yoshitsune. As the threat of Yoshitsune diminished, the Imperial Court deprived

Yoritomo of the right to collect taxes in the western Japan.

Therefore, the “*iihakō*” theory is not necessarily the only absolute theory. No current history textbook clearly states that the Kamakura shogunate was established in 1185.

Did Minamoto no Yoritomo have a clear vision of independence from the Imperial Court?

In 1190, after the destruction of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, Yoritomo went to Kyoto for the first time and met with Emperor Goshirakawa. During this visit to the capital, Yoritomo was appointed to the posts of Gon Dainagon and General of the Right Konoe, but resigned both positions before returning to Kamakura.

Classical scholars consider this to be Yoritomo's desire for independence, distancing himself from the imperial court.

However, Yoritomo called himself the “Great General of the Morning” and was a self-appointed military commander who protected the Imperial Court. Since Yoritomo continued to refer to himself as “former right general” even after his resignation, it is unlikely that he did not want to be seen as a “samurai general of the dynasty.

The reality is that Yoritomo, whose military base was the warriors of the eastern provinces, had to be based in Kamakura (at least for the present) and **resigned from both offices, which required him to serve close to the emperor.**

Yoritomo has consistently supported the Imperial Court and controlled the warriors with the Court's authority behind him.

What did the warriors think of Yoritomo's attitude as described above?

They may have hoped for “politics of the samurai, by the samurai, and for the samurai. However, this was only a vague

aspiration, and they do not seem to have understood what exactly they needed to do to realize it.

As is well known, even the samurai of the eastern provinces under Yoritomo's command received official positions from the imperial court without permission, and Yoritomo was furious with them. After Yoritomo's death, a movement to seek court rank became apparent.

It is difficult to believe that these Eastern samurai were seeking independence from the Imperial Court, or that they were dissatisfied with “Yoritomo's aristocracy.

The reason why the question “When was the Kamakura Shogunate established?” has been eagerly debated is that the Kamakura Shogunate continued to exist for 140 years, and even after its demise, its framework of governance had a decisive influence on the succeeding samurai regimes, the Muromachi Shogunate and the Edo Shogunate.

In other words, the controversy is premised on the historical understanding that the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate laid the foundation for several hundred years of samurai government.

However, as mentioned earlier, the Kamakura shogunate in its early period did not have the will to become independent from the Imperial Court, to gain an advantage over the Court, or to develop a samurai government.

Especially during the reign of Minamoto no Sanetomo, the third shogun, the shogunate and the imperial court cooperated with each other, and given Sanetomo's respect for the imperial court, there was a possibility that the shogunate would become a subcontractor of the imperial court.

On the contrary, there was even a fear that the Shogunate would be destroyed about 20 years after Yoritomo's death. This was the Jokyū Rebellion.

At the time, the Kamakura shogunate was in a situation where the Minamoto shogunate had been severed by the assassination of Minamoto no Sanetomo. Hojo Yoshitoki and Masako invited Mitora (later to become the fourth shogun, Fujiwara no Yoritsune), a distant relative of Yoritomo, from the regency family to succeed Minamoto no Sanetomo.

However, Mitora was still an infant, and Masako was forced to adopt an irregular system in which she looked after Mitora as a “nun shogun.”

Seeing the confusion in the shogunate, Emperor Go-Toba issued an order to destroy Hojo Yoshitoki.

To modern observers, who know the outcome, Emperor Go-Toba's military action seems foolhardy. However, Yoshitoki's naming as a “morning enemy” came as a great shock. The Shogunate could have collapsed in mid-air.

If Emperor Go-Toba had won the battle, what would have happened to history? There was a possibility that the Kamakura shogunate would have been destroyed, otherwise its power would have been greatly reduced, and it would have had to be subordinated to the Imperial Court.

As you know, the reality of history was reversed. The Kamakura shogunate forces won a great victory, and three emperors, including Emperor Go-Toba, were exiled. This was the first time in Japanese history that a vassal (non-emperor) punished a superior emperor, thus confirming the shogunate's supremacy over the Imperial Court.

From then on, **the Shogunate effectively seized the right to decide who would succeed to the throne.** Even the most important matter for the Imperial Court - who would be the next emperor - could no longer be decided without the permission of the Shogunate.

After the Jokyū Rebellion, the samurai families took control of politics in Japan. This was truly “samurai politics. Conversely, **the period prior to the Jokyū Rebellion was not, strictly speaking, a period of “samurai government.** Although the influence of the shogunate was very large, the center of politics remained at the imperial court.

It is debatable to what extent Hojo Yoshitoki had a clear political conception, but it is clear that he completed samurai politics as a result. He realized the dream of “surpassing the Imperial Court,” which Minamoto no Yoritomo could not have achieved or might not have even aspired to achieve.

Questions

1. What are the two major theories to pin down the year when the Kamakura shogunate was founded?
2. Why is the “iikuni” theory that the Kamakura shogunate was founded in 1192 not so convincing?
3. Why is the “iihako” theory that the Kamakura shogunate was founded in 1185 not so convincing?
4. What did the Gotoba Emperor want to do, when he saw the crisis of the Kamakura shogunate after the third shogun Sanetomo was assassinated?
5. In what sense is Hojo Yoshitoki so great?