To the samurai, martial ability was an expression of individual strength and valor, symbolizing their distinctive subculture as specialist men-at-arms. Starting in the ninth century (or arguably even earlier), Japanese warriors developed and cultivated an idiosyncratic culture based largely on their ability to utilize violence. Warrior ideals evolved over many centuries and were imbued with idioms of honor, such as the bonds of loyalty forged between retainer and lord, for whom—as the classic war tales frequently inform us—the warrior would gladly forfeit his life.

But how accurate is our understanding of the origin of samurai culture? It seems that Japanese and Westerners alike maintain a distorted, often-romanticized view of the samurai. For example, the long-held interpretation in the West of the so-called emergence of the samurai was largely based on an economic thesis put forth by Asakawa Kan’ichi, whose ideas were subsequently propagated by early generations of highly influential Western scholars of Japanese history and culture such as George Sansom and E. O. Reischauer.

In simple terms, the traditional view presents an unambiguous interpretation of the events that led to the appearance of powerful provincial warrior families in the late Heian period (794–1185). In Sansom’s classic three-volume treatise of Japanese history, *The History of Japan to 1334*, he states that “the gradual collapse of the civil power after the decline of the Fujiwara dictators was accompanied by a rise in the influence of warrior clans.”

Oppressed by high taxes, many peasants deserted their fields for other occupations, adversely impacting the Heian government’s income and influ-
ence. This caused instability and tension throughout the land, and landowners in the provinces were compelled to fortify their holdings to protect them from marauding bands of belligerents who had become disconnected from their familial connections in the capital and engaged in acts of brigandry to expand their own estates.

Even the court found itself unable to protect its assets in the provinces, and its economic base was significantly weakened as a result. Newly formed alliances of provincial warriors were able to gather political momentum and assert their power through the use of military force. Eventually, these provincial warriors became economically dominant as well. After the Genpei Disturbance (1180–85) and the abdication of the ineffectual nobles (kuge), the samurai were able to elevate themselves to powerful positions in society simply by filling the political holes that appeared. Their influence burgeoned with the formation of the Kamakura shogunate in 1189 by Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–99).

More recently, however, this interpretation of the rise of warriors to political dominance has been substantively amended. Among Western scholars, prominent theorists include J. W. Hall, Jeffrey Mass, and Marius B. Jansen. They refute the simplistic idea of kuge powerlessness in the face of warrior ascension. The contemporary consensus is that kuge actually maintained a significant degree of control and certainly did not hand political power over to the provincial samurai; by the time of the establishment of the first warrior government at the end of the twelfth century, the samurai remained relatively politically immature.

New theories of how the samurai rose to prominence have been postulated in Japan and the West from many different angles, especially in the last two decades. Some of the representative works in English include William Wayne Farris’s *Heavenly Warriors*, Karl Friday’s *Hired Swords*, and Ikegami Eiko’s *The Taming of the Samurai*.

Farris’s book avoids the term “emergence” and instead promotes the idea that the warriors “evolved” in an ongoing process spanning many centuries, before the eventual consolidation of a unified warrior power structure with the formation of the Kamakura shogunate. Farris also contests the “Western analogue theorists” who forcibly apply a Western model of feudalism to the samurai experience. He divides his analysis of samurai evolution into sections extending back to approximately 500 AD. He draws our attention to the culture of mounted archers—not uncommon throughout Asia—who were organized into an imperial army by Emperor Tenmu (?–686), whose name means “heavenly warrior,” hence the title of Farris’s book.
He conjectures that the aristocratic warriors of the Heian period did not suddenly appear and fill a political vacuum but rather inherited a much older culture that continued to develop over time. He argues that mounted warriors had become the main strike force on battlefields by the ninth century and that “many soldiers organized themselves into houses with the exclusive right to practice the martial arts, either as local aristocrats or local strongmen.” During the period extending from 500 to 1300 warriors were not pitted against the courtiers but instead acted as shields for them until the samurai asserted their political independence over the court starting in the thirteenth century.

Karl Friday also questions the perceived impotence of the court. Through a detailed analysis of the military technology and motivations of the imperial army and conscripts, he contends that the warriors at court and those stationed in the provinces were in fact allied. Furthermore, the court actively made use of provincial warriors to upgrade its military and policing system.

There were instances in which certain warriors exerted palpable influence, such as Taira Kiyomori (1118–81), who rose to dominate court politics and even enthroned his infant grandson Antoku (1178–85) as emperor. Nevertheless, Friday argues that for the most part the evolution of military institutions between the seventh and twelfth centuries followed a consistent pattern that relied on the military abilities of the provincial elites and lower members of the aristocracy.

Eiko Ikegami’s *The Taming of the Samurai* focuses on violence as the decisive factor in the rise of the samurai. She highlights this as a distinguishing raison d’être among the Japanese warrior subculture and also mentions the clashes between violent groups of eastern warriors and the indigenous Emishi people of northeastern Honshū. Central to her argument is the concept of honor (*na*), and the bonds of loyalty that were formed between the warrior and his lord through combat experience.

Ikegami contends that the gradual rise of the samurai to political prominence on a national scale was prompted by the dismantling of the military obligations that had previously been forced upon the general populace under the *ritsuryō* system. This culminated in certain offices, such as guard and military posts, becoming hereditary among a small, select group of nobles. Determined to maintain their monopoly over government positions, these noble families increasingly sought affiliation with warriors and even created their own private armies. This in turn provided an opportunity for career advancement among the middle- to lower-ranked nobles, who realized that martial ability could be their ticket to a successful career.
As Friday points out, “by the tenth century, military service at court and service as a provincial official had become parallel and mutually supportive careers for the members of several middle-ranked courtier houses collectively known as the *miyako no musha*, or ‘warriors of the capital.’”4 The best-known warriors were members of the houses of the Minamoto (Genji) and the Taira (Heiji or Heike). These two great warrior clans provide the heroes (and anti-heroes) of many of Japan’s war tales. Their feats in battle, particularly in the Hōgen (1156) and Heiji (1160) Disturbances and the Taira-Minamoto War (the Genpei Disturbance of 1180–85), were recorded for posterity in all their embellished gore and glory.

Although these war tales (*gunki monogatari*) provide valuable insights into samurai culture, they have also been at the root of the glorification and misconceptualization of samurai culture, even among warriors themselves. The war tales describing the rise to supremacy of Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–99) and the establishment of the first warrior government (*bakufu*) in Kamakura highlight a pivotal time in the evolution of the samurai. The formation of a warrior government did not spell the end of court authority, but it did signify the beginning of new conventions and rules that instilled new notions of warrior self-identity.

Yoritomo’s initiatives included legally elevating trustworthy vassals to the status of privileged housemen (*gokenin*), who were obligated to show loyalty to him. He also ensured that he was the only agent connecting his vassals with the court, which rendered warriors stationed in the capital ineffectual. In 1185 he rewarded his vassals with the titles and privileges of governor (*shugo*) and land steward (*jitō*). He successfully created a warrior union with “new mechanisms for organizing and directing its housemen, as well as an unprecedented clarity to the reciprocal obligations that bound them.”5 By and large, by the Kamakura period (1189–1333) “reciprocal obligation” meant the idealization of martyrdom as the definitive show of fidelity and personal honor.

Motoki Yasuo proposes a useful description of how samurai can be distinguished from other combatants who have been active throughout Japanese history:

*Bushi* [samurai] refers to the professional warriors who wielded political authority in medieval [*chūsei*] and early modern [*kinsei*] Japan. As professional warriors, they were distinctive from peasant or civilian conscript soldiers of the ancient [*kodai*] and modern [*kindai*] periods. In the sense of being hereditary, their existence differed greatly to the officials who were merely assigned military duty in ancient times, and also to the modern career soldier.6
Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–98) attempted to segregate warriors from non-combatants through the introduction of decrees defining occupation. Separation of farming and military functions was intended to get warriors off the land and drive a wedge between fickle vassals and volatile peasants lest they combine forces to overthrow their superiors. Hideyoshi’s diktats were not entirely unprecedented, nor were they obeyed particularly closely. Other daimyo, notably Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), also tried to consolidate occupational roles within the four spheres of agriculture, production, commerce, and military in their provinces. Although impossible to enforce to the letter, such measures did facilitate the rise of castle towns Sustained by the surrounding farmlands, castle towns functioned as administrative, economic, and military bases for daimyo.

With Hideyoshi’s nationwide Sword Hunt Edict (Katanagari-rei) of 1588, farmers were obliged to relinquish their weapons. Although the disarmament of non-warrior groups has been overstated in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, it can at least be concluded that government-sanctioned attempts at occupational segregation sought to make martial training formally the sole prerogative and responsibility of samurai beginning at the end of the sixteenth century.

PRAGMATISM CLOAKED IN ROMANTICISM

If we buy into the larger-than-life accounts of warrior feats as they are recorded in the war tales, warfare could be construed as a well-ordered and noble pursuit. However, the battles portrayed in popular literature through the centuries—such as the Heike monogatari (The tale of the Heike, early thirteenth century) and Taiheiki (Chronicle of great pacification, c. 1370)—are renowned for distorting the truth.

The typical battle scene portrayed in the war tales, although thoroughly bloody and violent, is regularly depicted as conforming to the following formula: mutual agreement on the time and place of battle; safe passage of emissaries as both armies face off; release of arrows to signal commencement; gradual advancement as increasingly accurate volleys of arrows are released; careful opponent selection, self-introduction, and combat at close quarters using bladed weapons; and guaranteed safety of noncombatants such as women and children.
Notwithstanding some genuine acts of gallantry and extraordinary valor, real battles rarely played out according to this blueprint, and the archetype of the romantic, glamorous, gentlemanly, and noble samurai is mostly farcical. Winning was everything. If underhanded methods were necessary to accomplish a gruesome task, so be it. One does not need to read between the lines in the old war tales to find accounts of blatant treachery, trickery, and what can essentially be described as far-from-gentlemanly deportment. Night attacks, hostage taking, broken promises, and espionage were commonplace and acceptable in pursuit of victory.

Interesting tenets of rational battle wisdom can be found in Kōyō-gunkan, a chronicle recording the exploits of the Takeda clan. For instance, according to transcriptions of his conversations on military affairs, the daimyo Takeda Shingen (1521–73) maintained a policy of attempting to win only six or seven battles out of ten. Attempting to win all ten would result in heavy casualties. In this fashion, while he might succeed in winning each individual battle, he would eventually lose the war. As survival of the clan was at stake, the samurai’s greatest weapon was a deep-rooted mastery of strategy in which the underlying ideology was pluck bolstered with cunning, deception, duplicity, and even retreat, if that was the smartest option.

To be sure, a samurai would forfeit his life in battle if trapped, and he believed his cherished reputation would live on. This is often interpreted as validating the strong bonds of loyalty between a lord and his stalwarts. The samurai ethos has even been described as “the moral of selfless dedication” (kenshin-no-dōtoku). Allegiance to one’s overlord was unquestionably an important component of warrior ethics, but there was also a very calculated side to this emotional connection. Although loyalty is championed as the adhesive for samurai hierarchical relationships (and also serves one of the most moving themes in the literature), it could be adjusted according to convenience. History abounds with examples of warriors who readily changed allegiance if circumstances were better elsewhere. It was not until the Tokugawa period that the ideal of unaltering loyalty to one lord became hereditary and resolute. But even then, scores of disenfranchised samurai (rōnin) roamed the countryside looking for new masters in the wake of some indiscretion, or even out of contempt for their reckless lord.

Ideally, however, the medieval warrior was expected to repay his lord’s special favor (go‘on) with servitude (hōkō). This meant the warrior could be
mobilized for military campaigns and was expected to perform valiantly and to the death if required. Battle provided an opportunity for the warrior to showcase his prowess. If he triumphantly took a number of heads from the enemy (preferably those of rank), he would be rewarded. If he were killed, his death would be commended as a spirited demise. Although he would not benefit directly, he would die assured that his lord would continue bestowing favor on his descendants. The notion of loyalty to the death was most often pragmatism cloaked in romanticism rather than a pure human bond, as it is usually portrayed.

The intangible benefit gained from gallantry was the currency of honor. A deceased samurai’s honor would be inherited by his sons and grandsons, and his feats of valor would be recounted as family lore. Conversely, if a samurai was deemed guilty of cowardice, his good name—and that of his ancestors and descendants—would be irreconcilably tarnished. While a European knight may have fought courageously to justify his posthumous place in God’s Kingdom, the samurai, who was resigned to the belief that his destiny ultimately lay in one of the hundreds of Buddhist hells before eventual rebirth, fought boldly to ensure the perpetual prosperity of his family line.

A paradox existed with regard to a warrior’s martial ability, especially in the Warring States period (1467–1568). The more valiant and skilled a warrior was at his craft, the more likely a rival daimyo army would be to try to poach him. Loyalty was a transferable bond. However, the provincial laws of this chaotic era urged warriors to remain faithful and true to their lords. The onus was on a lord to lead his men in a manner that inspired fidelity. He was burdened with the delicate task of keeping his warriors in line while at the same time emboldening their independent spirit. Failure to keep the balance could result in dissension and the defection of his warriors, ultimately leading to the extinction of his entire house or clan.

“House codes” (buke kakun) were precepts recorded for posterity by warrior family patriarchs to guide the clan scion and collateral descendants in appropriate behavior. A common tenet in various house codes was advice not to stifle the individual attributes of each warrior and to reward valiant service. House codes also placed weight on training in military arts. This was the samurai’s vehicle for accruing honor. Fighting was his vocation and weapons were the tools of his trade, but what did belonging to the profession-of-arms involve? Apart from actual combat experience, by what means did the samurai hone his military skills?
Early medieval period battles were primarily contested by mounted archers, foot soldiers with shock weapons such as naginata and pole arms, and archers on foot. According to Karl Friday, early medieval clashes “tended to be aggregates of lesser combats: melees of archery duels, and brawls between small groups, punctuated by general advances and retreats, and by volleys of arrows launched by bowmen on foot, protected by portable walls of shields.”

Starting in the Nanbokuchō period (1337–92) battle strategies shifted away from the skills of individual mounted warriors to tactics based on organized group attacks. This was concurrent with a change in the motivations for war, where the goal became the acquisition of vast territories. To achieve this objective, a warlord needed specialist platoons that could work as cogs in a highly regimented war machine.

Eiko Ikegami lists the following changes in the method of warfare in the late medieval period: “(1) the increased amount of manpower mobilized in battle; (2) strategic shift away from fights between individual champions, to planned collective movements of armies; (3) the rise of strong fortified castles; (4) the emergence of foot soldiers as a significant strike force; and (5) the introduction of firearms.”

The tools of warfare were also continually being adapted. In the case of swords, straight, double-edged blades (tsurugi or chokutō) were brought to Japan from China during the Kofun period (300–710). Curved single-edged tachi swords were fashioned beginning in the ninth century and became more stylized as forging methods advanced. Short swords with curved blades (uchi-gatana) appeared around the twelfth century; these were inserted with the blade upward through sashes at the waist as opposed to the now-customary tachi, which dangled blade-down at the side. Both the tachi and the uchi-gatana were generally worn together. By the fourteenth century uchi-gatana were lengthened and eventually replaced the tachi as the standard bladed weapon. The uchi-gatana was henceforth simply termed katana and used as both a cutting and a thrusting weapon. A shorter sword—the wakizashi—complemented the katana, and both were inserted through the waist sash to complete what became the standard two-sword set.

The adjustment in the preferred way of wearing swords—that is, on the left at the waist with the blade facing upward instead of dangling down—was concurrent with a transformation in the style of armor worn. Heian and Kamakura warriors donned grand but cumbersome sets of armor known as

**MEDIEVAL WARFARE AND THE SWORD MYTHOS**
ō-yoroi. With moveable protective flaps, ō-yoroi provided the mounted archer with ample protection as well as enough flexibility to release his arrows, but it hampered his maneuverability when he was forced to fight on foot.

From the late thirteenth through to the mid-fourteenth century, a gradual transition was made to a cheaper, lighter wraparound style of armor called hara-maki. This suggested a shift away from mounted archers as the dominant factor in battle, since the simpler armor offered foot soldiers stability and the option of using longer weapons such as yari (spears) without impediment.

There was also a noticeable rise in the number of swordsmiths around this time. In the late Heian period, Shimokawa Ushio records references to 450 smiths, compared to 1,550 in the Kamakura period and 3,550 in the Muromachi period. This is not to say that archers, both mounted and on foot, were obsolete just yet. In fact, records of battle wounds analyzed by historians Thomas Conlan, Suzuki Masaya, and others show that in the Nanbokuchō period (1334–92) arrow wounds were more prevalent than any other battle injury. Trawling through 175 documents, Suzuki found 554 identifiable injuries in addition to 44 fatalities. Of the injuries, 480 (86.6 percent) were caused by arrows; 46 (8.3 percent) by bladed weapons; 15 (2.6 percent) by rocks hurled by sling or rolled from hilltops or fortresses; and 6 (1.1 percent) by spears. Suzuki postulated that even during the Nanbokuchō period sword use was much less a factor in battle than projectile weapons.

Some scholars suggest that the sword starred more in battle following the introduction of firearms in the sixteenth century. Musket balls, they argue, could penetrate even the heaviest armor. Given the futility of heavy armor against guns, less unwieldy suits were adopted for maneuverability, but this left warriors more susceptible to blades. Moreover, vulnerability to volleys of musket balls also incited warriors to engage at close quarters with more rapidity. Although it is an interesting theory, it is negated by documentary evidence. Suzuki Masaya’s research reveals that of the 584 wounds logged in war records from 1563 to 1600, 263 were inflicted by guns, 126 by arrows, 99 by spears, and 30 by rocks. Only forty warriors suffered sword lacerations, and twenty-six were felled by a combination of weapons. On the basis of this analysis Suzuki contends that although swords were certainly brandished in the fray, they were more useful for removing the heads of fallen foe (kubi-tori) than engaging in actual combat. The kubi-tori were cleaned up and presented for inspection as “invoices for payment” for services rendered. Skullduggery was rampant, and samurai often picked through battlefields, claiming crowns off cadavers that they had not even felled.
Suzuki also points out the impracticality of the sword as a battlefield weapon, an observation based in part on the work of katana expert Naruse Sekanji (1888–1948). Blades bend easily when cuts are made with imprecise trajectory or angle, and the katana was known to snap when struck on the flat of the blade by spears or staffs. Of 1,681 blades that Naruse repaired personally, 30 percent had been smashed in duels and the remaining 70 percent were damaged through inadequate cleaning and care or reckless cutting practice (tameshi-giri).  

Although by no means a completely ineffectual weapon, the sword’s practical value in a violent free-for-all was less than that of the sturdy, versatile, and easier-to-use yari. As a weapon for self-defense in the course of daily life, however, the sword was indispensable. Naruse’s findings corroborate this: although they were easily damaged, swords were the weapon of choice in duels, executions, and assassinations.

Apart from its use in duels or dastardly acts of violence committed beyond the field of battle, what elevated the sword to the emblematic position it attained among warriors? While the katana was irrefutably a lethal weapon, it retained an important and peculiar quality beyond being a simple implement of war. Starting with the first straight, double-edged iron swords imported from China that marked Japan’s entry into the Iron Age, the shiny, hard quality of the metal created through advanced Chinese technology gave swords a perceived mystical quality. Although used as weapons, they also fulfilled an important symbolic function in religious ceremonies. In line with ancient Chinese ideals, swords were believed to contain magical powers with the ability to ward off evil. After taking root in Japan, these beliefs matured into a distinctive Japanese ethos that came to feature prominently in national mythology.

A good example of this can be found in the tale of the eight-headed serpent Yamata-no-Orochi. The story describes capricious young Susanno, who has been thrown out of Heaven for tricking his sister, the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami. He then recovers a mythical sword from the tail of an eight-headed serpent and presents it to his sister as an act of placation. Generations later, the same sword is presented for protection to the great warrior Yamato Takeru by his aunt, Yamato-hime of the Ise Shrine. When he is lured into an open field by a treacherous warlord who then sets the grass on fire, Yamato Takeru uses the sword to cut the grass and stop the spread of the fire, discovering in the process that the weapon is magical. After exacting revenge, he names the blade Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi (literally “grass-cutting...
sword”). Today the sword is housed in the Atsuta Shrine as one the Three Sacred Treasures that make up the imperial regalia, along with a mirror (yata-no-kagami) and the magatama bead. In other words, the sword became symbolic of imperial authority.

The mythological associations and belief in certain magical qualities of swords are manifest in a curious samurai custom. The term meitō refers to a sword of special significance. A sword was recognized as extraordinary if it had been made by a legendary smith, had an awe-inspiring cutting quality, or belonged to a historical figure. Although an inanimate object, a meitō would be given a name.

Records for appraising the value of swords were kept from as early as the reign of Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436–90), the eighth shogun of the Muromachi period. It can be inferred that at this time swords were emblematic of their owner’s authority as well as important items of exchange. In addition to deriving narcissistic satisfaction from owning a meitō, owners of swords of worth used them as a form of currency. Warriors fought for prizes. Ideally, they would receive parcels of land from their lord as a reward for heroism, but they could also be rewarded with money or valuable artifacts such as antique tea utensils or a remarkable sword.17

Swords were not the primary frontline weapon. Other than for the ignoble task of headhunting, they were used only as sidearms to supplement principal battlefield armaments, namely missile weapons such as arrows—and later musket balls—and long, sturdy thrusting weapons such as yari. However, off the battlefield was a different matter, where the sword proved its worth in brawls, duels, and other homicidal acts.

THE AESTHETICIZATION OF VIOLENCE

What, then, was the impetus behind the rise of specialist martial art schools that tended to focus on swordsmanship from as early as the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Karl Friday maintains that the creation of styles or schools of martial arts (ryūha) “constituted a new phenomenon—a derivative, not a linear improvement, of earlier, more prosaic military training.”18 The Muromachi period was key in terms of samurai aesthetic development, so it should come as no surprise that the art of swordsmanship was inspired by the systematization of other, more advanced, art forms.
What political forces facilitated martial aestheticization in the Muromachi period? In 1333, after a period of exile for a plot to overthrow the weakening Kamakura shogunate in 1324, the emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339) returned to Kyoto more determined than ever to restore imperial power. His objective was realized with the aid of renegade shogunate generals Ashikaga Takauji (1305–58) and Nitta Yoshisada (1301–38). This led to Go-Daigo’s Kemmu Restoration (1333–36), but the alliance between these men was short-lived, ending when Yoshisada joined forces with Go-Daigo to overthrow Takauji’s authority. Go-Daigo then fled to Yoshino (Nara) and established the Southern Court in 1337, while Takauji, who backed the north, formed the Muromachi shogunate (1338–1573) in Kyoto. This started a war of legitimacy between the Northern and Southern Courts that lasted from 1337 to 1392.

Takauji established his regime in Kyoto rather than in Kamakura to the east to keep tabs on the kuge political machinations and circumvent any potential uprising. This move generated a massive influx of samurai from the provinces into the capital, where they rapidly began to influence political and cultural life. As they replaced nobles in positions of authority, they felt pressure to behave in an appropriate fashion and break away from the rustic mannerisms that had earned them the scorn of refined aristocrats.

Samurai concern for propriety is evident in two trends in the Muromachi period: the proliferation of house codes (buke kakun); and the circulation of texts outlining unique samurai ceremonies, rules and customs (buke kojitsu)—adapted from the protocols of the ancient imperial court (yūsoku kojitsu).

Warriors started developing their own forms of etiquette in the Kamakura period. At the onset of the Muromachi period, the study of cultural and ceremonial standards set by the court took on more urgency among the warrior subculture as they asserted their cultural equality and political superiority. There were protocols for court ceremonies, religious rituals, appropriate attire, daily interactions, and the treatment and use of arms and armor, especially with regard to archery. The two main authorities that ordained kojitsu norms for samurai were the Ogasawara and the Ise families.

House codes of the Muromachi period exhibit a newfound concern for balancing martial aptitude with refinement in the genteel arts and civility; namely an equilibrium between bu (military arts) and bun (civil arts and letters). It was no longer appropriate for warriors to be seen as brawny, bucolic bumpkins with no sense of decorum or edification. They needed to
be worthy rulers by virtue of both intellect and violence, when necessary. Samurai had long felt culturally inferior to the nobles, and now they sought to cover themselves with a mantle of equality, or even to assert their superiority.

There are a number of well-known house codes from this period, such as *Chikubasho* (Selected precepts for young generations, ca. 1383) by Shiba Yoshimasa (1350–1410) and *Imagawa ryōshin seishi* (The regulations of Imagawa Ryōshun) by Imagawa Ryōshun (also known as Sadayo, 1325–1420). They stood the test of time and were still studied enthusiastically, with a sense of nostalgia, by warriors of the Tokugawa era. Apart from military strategy, these house codes offered meticulous advice on proper social deportment, such as where to sit at a banquet and how to exchange sake cups, and guidance on cleaning, travel etiquette, and manner of speech.

The *buke kojitsu* texts were more detailed with regard to etiquette and applied to all warriors, whereas the *kakun* were more specific and applied only to the warriors of a particular family or clan. Primarily written by the head of a clan to ensure that his sons or retainers did not incur shame in their persnickety honor-driven community, the articles accentuated the right mindset rather than just the right form.

Ashikaga Takauji wrote a celebrated set of house rules—*Takauji-kyō goisho* (Testament of lord Takauji). The thirteenth article demonstrates the value placed on *bunbu-ryōdō* (the two ways of the civil and martial arts). “Bu and bun are like two wheels of a cart. If one wheel is missing, the cart will not move.” Living up to the ideal of *bunbu-ryōdō* espoused in the house codes, it should be pointed out, was primarily the responsibility of the upper echelons of warrior society. In his *kakun* of 1412, Imagawa Ryōshun advised, “It is natural that the samurai learns the ways of war, and applies himself to the acquisition of the basic fighting skills needed for his occupation. . . . Without applying oneself to study [bun], however, it is impossible to be a worthy ruler.”

Another tour de force in *kakun*, Shiba Yoshimasa’s *Chikubasho*, also admonishes the ruling class to pay attention to propriety and self-cultivation. “Have a mind to improve one step at a time, and take care in speech so as not to be thought a fool by others.” “All things should be done with singleness of mind. . . . Warriors must have calmness of mind, and the ability to understand the measure of other people’s. This is crucial to success in military matters.” With regard to balance in the military and civil arts, the code states, “In this world, honor and reputation are valued above all else. As a man is able to enhance his standing by virtue of competence in the arts, he should
try to excel in these too, irrespective of whether he has instinctive talent or not. . . . Naturally, a warrior should be skilled in using the bow and arrow in such practices as mato, kasagake, and inu ou mono.”

Yoshimasa states the importance of being au fait with arts such as linked verse and music in addition to the military arts. He alludes to military training with the bow and horse, but swordsmanship was also essential for self-defense in the course of daily activities. This is mentioned in the Yoshisada-ki (Records of Nitta Yoshisada), around the first half of the fourteenth century.

Our house records admonish that when you walk along the road and see someone, pass by with an arrow fixed to your bow, or with your hand on the long sword’s hilt. These are customs of the past. Our times are not that hard and these [specific] customs are outdated and ridiculous, but in your heart you should treat every person [you meet in the street] as your enemy. Even if you do not reveal this state of alertness in your outward appearance, people will certainly know it.

The elevation of swordsmanship into an art coincides with samurai involvement in other traditional artistic disciplines (geidō), which included calligraphy and painting (shodō), theater (Noh), flower arrangement (kadō), tea ceremony (sadō), dance (mai), and various forms of poetry (such as renga and waka). These civil arts inspired the aesthetic development of swordsmanship. Swordsmanship was practical but could also be theatrical, and it was easily adapted to fit the philosophies being embraced in performing arts like Noh. Like masters of other arts, a virtuoso in the art of swordsmanship stood to gain high social standing and patronage and hence honor, employment, and wealth.

The word geidō first appeared in Kyoraika (1433), a famous treatise by the renowned Noh master Zeami (1363–1443). He considered Noh and the other arts to be “ways” (michi or dō) for seeking perfection. The suffix -dō had been attached to the names of various occupations from before the Heian period, but it simply designated the specialization in, and transmission of, specific skills without necessarily containing the spiritual connotations implied in the term geidō.

Geidō became permeated with deeply spiritual meaning, and prodigies who reached a certain level of mastery would receive accolades and patronage from members of high society. To enhance and maintain their prestige, the masters of these arts codified their fighting techniques and arcane knowledge.
(hiden) into systems and conveyed it only to select disciples. Furtiveness about the hidden hiden teachings gave the master an air of mystique as well as an aura of cultural authority. Disciples’ reputations also benefited through association with the exclusive culture club.

Although practical combat application and effectiveness were always considerations in the development of the martial arts, infatuation with the artistic excellence of techniques was clearly an important factor in the genesis of ryūha. The martial arts were, as Friday contends, an “abstraction of military science, not merely an application of it.” Furthermore, the sword, with its long history entrenched in Japan’s ancient myths, ties to mysticism, and exterior beauty, was the perfect weapon for an art that went beyond just combat concerns. A fixation with questions of life and death that were stimulated through the experience of war set swordsmanship and its secrets apart from all of the other geidō.

THE GENESIS OF HOLISTIC MARTIAL ART SCHOOLS

The medieval battlefields of Japan were not simply settings for murderous intent; the reality was far more complicated. As historian Futaki Ken’ichi observed, “It was a world both religious and artistic in nature, where men demonstrated their physical and spiritual prowess bolstered by resourcefulness and strategy, and ultimately decided by the will of heaven.” Superstition, divination, and religious beliefs played just as important a role in the way battle was waged as the martial skills of the individual warriors and the military tactics of the commander.

Although certain traditions of archery and horsemanship, such as the Ogasawara school, had already established well-defined protocols during the Kamakura period, it is difficult to identify organized schools of swordsmanship before the fourteenth century. What sources can be found are generally scant and open to conjecture. The earliest sword styles were probably developed as practical family affairs, passed on from father to son but not divulged to outsiders.

There are some descriptions in the old war tales of what appear to be distinctive styles of swordsmanship with specified techniques. For example, the Heike monogatari depicts the exploits of the warrior-monk Jōmyō Meishū. In the section titled “Battle on the Bridge,” this fearsome fighter kills twelve men and wounds eleven others with twenty-four arrows. He then battles on
with his naginata, which snaps after he engages his sixth enemy. Finally, he pulls out his sword as a last resort: "Hard-pressed by the enemy host, he slashed in every direction, using the zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragonfly reverse, and waterwheel maneuvers. After cutting down eight men on the spot, he struck the helmet top of a ninth so hard that the blade snapped at the hilt rivet, slipped loose, and splashed into the river. Then he fought on desperately with a dirk as his sole resource."\textsuperscript{27}

Although the Heike monogatari, which is thought to have been written sometime in the early thirteenth century, predates the earliest known schools of swordsmanship, such as the Kage-ryū or the Nen-ryū, passages such as this one indicate the existence of distinctive sword techniques. It also suggests that martial systems that included an array of weaponry can be traced back to the twelfth century, although they were probably comparatively basic at this time. During the Muromachi period, more sophisticated and comprehensive martial systems emerged, but at this early point in history the profession of arms was still mostly taught within the confines of families or clans.

The kind of training warriors engaged in varied depending on the period, and even their rank. For example, when mounted archery was considered the supreme form of combat during the Kamakura period, elite warriors would hone their skills through yabusame, inu ou mono, and kasagake.\textsuperscript{28} Lower-ranked warriors practiced foot archery and fighting with weapons such as glaives and polearms. However, regardless of his specialty, a warrior needed to be familiar with a variety of different weapons. When his arrows ran out, he would use his sword or naginata; when that broke, he would use his dirk or resort to barehanded grappling and even biting. Dealing with adversaries who were equipped with various weapons required that a warrior have at least a fundamental understanding of how they were utilized in order to defend himself against them.

Numerous political, social, cultural, and military factors eventually led to the rise of specialist schools of swordsmanship, and certain criteria were indispensable to ensure perpetuation. The weak hold the Ashikaga shogunate had on its vassals at the middle of the Muromachi period gave rise to powerful military rivals, militant monasteries, and bands of riotous outlaws. Japan was a perilous place in which to live at the time, and not just for warriors. Peasants were motivated to learn martial skills for the sake of self-preservation, and as the scale of war increased they were increasingly press-ganged into the swelling daimyo armies on a seasonal basis and needed training.
Itinerant warriors sought daimyo willing to secure their services, as either mercenaries or instructors for their part-time peasant armies. Also, as horses were being used proportionally less in the large, regimented battles that were waged in the late medieval period, more urgency was placed on developing infantry tactics and close-quarter combat skills. Systemized martial curricula became necessary to facilitate military instruction, with the added ingredient of *hide* power for good measure. I have already outlined the current theory that the sword was only a secondary weapon in battle. All the same, sword usage became more cutting-edge through combat experience, and some warriors began to formulate their own styles of sword work. This led to the rise of those swordsmen who established their own sword art schools and reaped the benefits as combat celebrities.

Karl Friday maintains that swordsmen, even during the turbulent Sengoku era, “had more in common with Olympic marksmanship competitors—training with specialized weapons to develop esoteric levels of skill under particularized conditions—than with Marine riflemen.” I tend to agree with this analogy at one level: martial artistry and soldiery required different skills. Then again, the swordsman was a soldier as well as a martial artist and, depending on the circumstances, there was always going to be a degree of overlap in core skills and mindset, even if the actual combat techniques were poles apart.

A successful martial artist needed a proven record in pitched battle; the reputation he garnered in war augmented the legitimacy of his art. It should also be added that a number of martial *ryūha* were based more on armored soldiery than naked-blade dueling, or at least included techniques that took into account the differences between “art” and “war.” The illustration of a medieval battleground in figure 5 shows warriors engaged in a frenzied free-for-all at close quarters. It is hard to imagine combatants being too concerned with aesthetic matters of beauty in form as they cut and thrust at each other for all their worth. Note the severed head—an apparent trophy—at the lower left.

The prototypical *ryūha* of swordsmanship started evolving around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The founders drew inspiration from artistic concepts centering on ideals of perfection, infused with instinctive discernment gleaned from thrashing about in battle. The juxtaposition of aesthetic and religious paradigms with empirical knowledge is what gave each of these schools their signature qualities.

Not just any warrior could create a school on a whim. He needed combat experience and a reputation for indomitability. Charisma and proven techni-
FIGURE 5. The brutality of the medieval battlefield, shown in this depiction of a battle between Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda Shingen at Kawanakajima in the mid-1500s. (Courtesy of Bunkasha International)
cal proficiency were requisite for attracting students. Furthermore, the techniques developed by the progenitor (ryūso) had to be learnable. Additionally, a system for imparting the knowledge to disciples was necessary to ensure continuity. The kanji for ryū means to flow or cascade, and in the context of the arts it inferred the flow of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Instruction would typically involve one-on-one techniques taught using predetermined patterns of movements (kata), oral teachings (kuden), and, later on in the Tokugawa period, written teachings (densho) in the form of cryptic handwritten scrolls that transmitted the higher principles of the school. These scrolls were often purposefully vague to safeguard “trade secrets” from outsiders.

Fear greatly weakens combat competence. A warrior who does not quiver in the face of death or injury is a formidable foe indeed. Having had experience fighting to the death, the founders of ryūha in the medieval period incorporated into their curricula the psychological lessons they had learned. Typically, the highest level of hiden teachings was simultaneously esoteric and pragmatic. Ideally, hiden held the key to the “holy grail” of combat—a superlative combination of body and mind, attained by transcending concerns for life and death, that was believed to make the warrior unassailable. These teachings were jealously guarded by adherents of the ryūha.

As I will expand upon in the following chapter, during the Tokugawa period the content of ryūha doctrines became increasingly esoteric and mystical, and new kata were being invented at a prolific rate. More than anything, it was kata that represented the lifeblood of the ryūha throughout the history of martial arts. Synergy of body and mind were taught through kata, which were usually performed in pairs. Martial arts in China and Korea also incorporated kata training, but the exercises were mainly performed alone. Through practicing kata with a partner, a Japanese warrior was able to learn the significance of timing and distance (maai), breathing (kokyū), apposite attacking opportunities, and posture, as well as to develop his mental strength.

The forms and process for learning kata are different in each tradition. However, one concept is applied to all of the traditional Japanese arts, not just martial: shu-ha-ri (maintain-break-separate). Scrolls of the Ono-ha Ittō-ryū, a traditional and highly influential school of swordsmanship during the Tokugawa period, explain that a student must follow three steps to learn martial techniques. First, the teachings of a master must be strictly adhered to without deviation (shu). Then, after the student has absorbed everything he can from his master, he breaks the ideas down to try to acquire a higher understand-
ing of the principles (ha). Last, after testing and enhancing his basic knowledge, the warrior aims to acquire an even deeper understanding of the teachings, one that is in fact so profound that he essentially creates his own path (ri).³⁰

There are other, similar terms that describe the process of learning the basic moves, improving on them, and finally achieving a transcendent state in which the techniques become an expression of the warrior’s very being and his being becomes an expression of the techniques. This ultimate state of “martial enlightenment” occurs supposedly when a new ryūha is born. It represents a perfect union of technique and mind, reinforced by a spiritual dogma and schematized into a curriculum to pass on to disciples.

Kata can be defined as a type of “death ritual,” configured as prearranged mock combat that provides an encoded scheme for technical improvement and spiritual growth through flirting with mortality. In almost all kata, one adept—usually the senior one—is allegorically killed, with the blade stopping just millimeters from a vital spot as the symbolic death blow is delivered. In this role-play of death, the junior adept aspires to seamlessly unify mind, technique, and precision of execution. The senior “sacrifices” himself to teach his partner the correct instant and method for capitalizing on physical and psychological weakness, while contemplating the “virtual reality” of his own demise.

Practicing each different kata over and over, the samurai trained his mind to enter what is commonly referred to now as “the zone,” and he programmed his body to react instinctively to myriad technical possibilities, rising above concerns for self-preservation. Training was far more than a physical pursuit; it was a kind of religious exercise encapsulated in the notion of shugyō (ascetic training)—a term utilized in the worlds of both samurai and Buddhist monks that is still used today to denote the study of modern martial arts as opposed to purely athletic training.

Karl Friday contends that the martial arts were “fundamentally secular arts in which pietistic-sounding locutions often mask entirely down-to-earth pieces of information.”³¹ Undeniably, the use of Shinto, Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian terms and constructs to give techniques an air of divine infallibility was commonplace, but the religious aspect of martial arts cannot be written off so easily. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz formulated a definition for religion that is, I believe, wholly applicable to martial art ryūha and the warriors who studied in them. According to Geertz, a religion is: “(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an
aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” My point here is that almost all the martial ryūha that developed in the late medieval period orbited around the ideological crux of life and death. The emphasis on highly symbolic rituals and divinely inspired techniques, combined with a medley of magical and polytheistic beliefs, sustained warriors in their quest for technical excellence and spiritual enlightenment. Furthermore, idiosyncratic hiden teachings inculcated in the adept a comprehension of cosmic principles of universal order and his transient existence. It also encouraged a connection with mythical tradition, which in turn bestowed on the disciple an air of uniqueness and supreme confidence. Although warriors typically adhered to a specific religious affiliation, such as one of the various sects of Buddhism, the martial ryūha was akin to a religious cult in its own right.

The warrior trained “religiously” to the extent that the techniques became a part of his very being, helping him to reach a transcendent state of selflessness that came to be defined with various terms of Buddhist origin such as muga (no-self) or mushin (no-mind). It should also be pointed out that although Zen Buddhism was an important element in many schools, it was not the defining influence. For sure, scores of warriors were attracted to Zen ideals and practiced the religion as a way to detach from mundane concerns and accept impermanency. As Peter Haskel eloquently expressed, Zen’s attractiveness to martial artists was in “its stress on directness and instantaneousness of response, on immediately ‘sizing up’ others’ capabilities; and its insistence on flexibility, on meeting each situation free of preconceptions and expectations, even in the face of death.”

Many Zen-based terms are prevalent in the classical schools of swordsmanship and the lexicon of modern budo. In most cases, however, the terms were simply borrowed and adapted to the context of martial arts. Esoteric forms of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and indigenous regional folk beliefs all are featured, to varying degrees and forms, in the eclectic mix of martial philosophy. This is illustrative of Japan’s long tradition of polytheistic, syncretic religious culture.

THE “THREE GREAT SCHOOLS” OF SWORDSMANSHIP

Three main traditions provided the core teachings for hundreds of offshoot schools: the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū (Direct and correct teach-
nings from the deity of the Katori Shrine), the Nen-ryū (School of perception), and the Kage-ryū (Shadow school). In particular, the regions of Kashima and Katori were central to the development of the sword arts since ancient times.\textsuperscript{34} Kashima-no-Tachi (the Sword [style] of Kashima) is a hallowed tradition that was established by Kuninazu-no-Mahito, a priestly celebrant at the Kashima Shrine. After receiving divine inspiration from the deity Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto, he transformed the sword rituals for purification ceremonies into combat techniques. There are various hypotheses about when Kuninazu-no-Mahito lived, but the standard theory indicates that it was sometime in the seventh century. He was guided by the deity to the secret technique known as \textit{hitotsu-no-tachi} (the foremost sword) or \textit{shinmyō-ken} (the divinely inspired sword), which became the foundation technique for his clan-based tradition.

Beginning during the reign of Emperor Sutoku, from 1123 to 1142, Kashima-no-Tachi (the Sword of Kashima) was referred to as Kashima Shichi-ryū (seven schools of Kashima), suggestive of the seven families that were closely associated with the Kashima Shrine and the secret teachings passed on by Kuninazu-no-Mahito. At some stage during the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, Kashima-no-Tachi was divided into the two categories of Jōko-ryū (ancient-period style) and the Chūko-ryū (middle-period style). The latter was revised by Tsukahara Bokuden (1489–1571), a descendent of the Yoshikawa family of Kashima, into the Shintō-ryū around the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Table 3 shows how scholars categorized the various schools in the Tokugawa period. Given the close geographical proximity of Katori and Kashima, sword traditions from these regions were often considered to be principally the same in terms of origin or at least with significant overlap among their progenitors. The Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū is often abbreviated to the Katori-ryū or even Shintō-ryū, which can cause confusion with the Shintō-ryū (which is written in Japanese with different characters) created by Tsukahara Bokuden.

The origins of most of these early traditions are unclear and shrouded in mythical claims alluding to divine inspiration. For example, the lore of the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū, which is considered one of the oldest extant schools of swordsmanship in Japan, has it that at the age of sixty, founder Iizasa Chōisai (1387–1488) endured a harsh one-thousand-day training regime of fasting and prayer in the Katori Shrine. One night the shrine deity, Futsunushi-no-Kami, appeared to him as a small boy standing on top
### Table 3: Japan’s first schools of swordsmanship, as defined by Tokugawa-period scholars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of school</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenshinshō-den Katori</td>
<td>The Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū was founded by Iizasa Chōisai (1387–1488). Foremost offshoots from this school include the Bokuden-ryū (Shintō-ryū) and the Arima-ryū.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shintō-ryū</td>
<td>The Kashima Shin-ryū was founded by Matsumoto Bizen-no-Kami (dates unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashima Shin-ryū</td>
<td>According to some sources, Iizasa Chōisai was Matsumoto's teacher. Others, however, indicate that Tsukahara Bokuden was actually a Matsumoto's student instead of Iizasa Chōisai's. Clearly, there was considerable overlap in the earliest schools, especially as they originated in the same locality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nen-ryū</td>
<td>Created by the monk Jion (1351–?).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chūjō-ryū</td>
<td>The Chūjō school traces its origins back to the monk Jion. Related splinter schools include Toda-ryū and the well-known Ittō-ryū.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kage-ryū</td>
<td>Formed by Aisu Ikōsai (1452–1538), the Kage-ryū line of schools became increasingly influential in the Tokugawa period with the shogunate's patronage of the Yagyū branch of Kamiizumi Ise-no-Kami's Shinkage-ryū (New shadow school).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashima Shichi-ryū (Seven Schools of Kashima; also referred to as the Seven Schools of Kantō)</td>
<td>Scholars devised this classification of schools in the Tokugawa period to represent the main lines that evolved in the eastern provinces.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Kashima</td>
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<td>2. Katori</td>
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<td>3. Honshin-ryū</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Bokuden-ryū</td>
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<td>5. Shintō-ryū</td>
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<td>6. Yamato-ryū</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Ryōi-ryū</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyō Hachi-ryū (Eight Schools of Kyoto)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Kiichi-ryū</td>
<td>The existence of these schools is difficult to verify. They were allegedly offshoots of martial arts taught to eight monks by Kiichi Hōgan and are traditionally associated with Kyoto and the Kuramadera Temple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Yoshitsune-ryū</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Masakado-ryū</td>
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<td>4. Kurama-ryū</td>
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<td>5. Suwa-ryū</td>
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<td>6. Kyō-ryū</td>
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<td>7. Yoshioka-ryū</td>
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<td>8. Hōgan-ryū</td>
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of a plum tree and divulged secrets of strategy, stating, “Thou shalt be the master of all swordsmanship under the sun.” It was on the basis of these divine teachings that he formed his school.

The following accounts of the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū, Nenryū, and Kage-ryū, as well as the stories of their respective progenitors, are found in Hinatsu Shigetaka’s (1660–1731) 1716 treatise Honchō bugei shōden (Brief accounts of our country’s military arts). This is arguably the most important work recording the history of classical schools of swordsmanship, archery, and other martial arts. Subsequent works dealing with the same topic, such as Mikami Genryū’s Gekken sōdan (A collection of stories on swordsmanship, 1790), Bujutsu keifu-ryaku (Martial school genealogies, author unknown, 1790), and Bujutsu ryūso-roku (Record of martial school heads, author unknown, 1843) rely heavily on the information chronicled by Hinatsu. Unfortunately, much of the information in Hinatsu’s work is based on conjecture and is difficult, if not impossible, for modern scholars to verify. However, the text is still useful for understanding how samurai themselves interpreted the roots of their martial culture.

The description of the origins of the Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū starts by stating that Iizasa Chōisai was born in a small village called Iizasa located in the Katori district of Shimōsa (now Chiba Prefecture). He later relocated to the nearby village of Yamazaki, where he became mesmerized by the arts of the sword and spear and quickly proved to have outstanding talent in using them. Hinatsu casts him as being “the progenitor of sword and spear arts in the middle period.”

Aisu Ikō (1452–1538) was the founder of the Kage-ryū (Shadow school). Little is known about him, but it is thought that his family resided in Ise, and he was engaged in piracy—an occupation that took him as far as Korea, China, and the Ryūkyū islands. Where and from whom he learned swordsmanship is the cause of much speculation, but it is plausible that his style was influenced by his sojourns in China.

In 1487, his vessel was shipwrecked off the coast of Kyushu, but he managed to make his way to shore, where he found the Udo Daigongen Shrine. Grateful to be alive, he abandoned his life at sea and spent thirty-seven days praying and fasting at the shrine. A “monkey-like apparition” appeared before him and communicated the higher secrets of combat. (One document, Hirasawa-ke denki, written by Ikō’s descendent, Hirasawa Mondo Michiari, claims that the deity appeared as a spider.) This shrine deity instructed him to duel with a local warrior named Sumiyoshi. Empowered by his newfound
knowledge, Ikō defeated his foe and became famous as he traveled throughout the land testing his skills. His illustrious student Kamiizumi Ise-no-Kami (1508–77) created the Shinkage-ryū (New shadow school), which came to great prominence in the Tokugawa period through Yagyū Muneyoshi and his son Munenori.

Nen Ami Jion (c. 1350–c. 1408), formerly known as Sōma Shirō, was the founder of the Nen-ryū. Again, details of his career are sketchy and often conflicting. He was still a child when his father—a celebrated retainer of Nitta Yoshisada (1301–38)—was assassinated. His wet nurse cared for him until he was seven years old, and then he was placed in the care of a Buddhist priest at Yugōji Temple, where he became a monk and was conferred the Buddhist name Nen Ami Jion.

At age ten he transferred to the Kuramadera Temple in Kyoto, where he commenced his study of the martial arts, becoming adroit at using an assortment of weapons. He then moved to the Jufukuji Temple in Kamakura, where a priest named Eiyū taught him the highest secrets of swordsmanship. He traveled the country perfecting his skills. In Kyushu he received divine teachings from the Buddhist deity Marishiten via a supernatural creature known as a tengu while engaged in austere training at the Anryakuji Temple. These teachings formed the basis of the Nen-ryū. Other stories suggest he avenged his father’s murder before taking Buddhist vows.

Chūjō Hyōgo (?–1384), one of Jion’s students, created the third significant style of swordsmanship of the fourteenth century, the Chūjō-ryū. This tradition eventually gave rise to the Ittō-ryū (School of one-sword), one of the most distinguished schools of swordsmanship in the Tokugawa period and considered to be one of the main guiding influences on the techniques and philosophy of modern kendo.

According to Hinatsu, Chūjō Hyōgo lived in Kamakura and was a parishioner of the Jufukuji Temple. He studied under Jion, who was living in the temple for many years, and became a master of the inner secrets of sword and spear combat.

Unfortunately, there is little that can be confirmed as factual with regard to the original ryūha. We can only piece together tidbits of information and try to avoid the temptation of believing all that has been written by later generations of adherents. Followers were devout believers in the divine genres of their schools and understandably had (and still have) a tendency to embellish history. Tradition was continually invented to enhance the reputation and perceived potency of a school’s wisdom. These invented traditions
**Figure 6.** Historic lineages of the main kenjutsu schools. Names of the progenitors or heirs of each tradition are included in parentheses. Please note that Japanese names changed with age or status, and differ slightly depending on the historical document being referred to.
were elaborated on further over subsequent generations in offshoot schools, which developed increasing technical and spiritual sophistication.

Figure 6 outlines the main *ryū* introduced here, along with the splinter schools that are related to them. Although it merely scratches the surface, and some aspects are impossible to verify, it provides a visual representation of how martial schools developed and were interrelated.

**NONPAREIL SWORD MASTERS**

By the mid to late sixteenth century, daimyo pursued noteworthy instructors to train them and their men in swordsmanship. Individual warriors also sought skilled teachers to guide them to new levels of martial prowess and greater employment opportunities. This was a time when samurai roamed the countryside on ascetic martial pilgrimages for months or years at a time, engaging not only in duels but also in austere physical and spiritual training in shrine and temple precincts.

Of the three main source schools mentioned above (Tenshinshō-den Katori Shintō-ryū, Kage-ryū, and Nen-ryū), it was the second and third generations of disciples who were able to take advantage of the growing esteem that came with being a master of the sword. After absorbing the celestial knowledge of the founders, enlightened disciples crafted even more refined philosophical frameworks to supplement the evolving body of techniques.

The names of many of the distinguished swordsmen involved in this evolutionary process live on. Numerous schools sprang from the initial three main source *ryūha* and other lesser-known systems. I will restrict the following brief commentary to the most celebrated traditions of which the pith is still evident in modern kendo.

By founding the Shinkage-ryū, Kamiizumi Ise-no-Kami gained cult status throughout Japan. He is thought to have studied under Aisu Ikō’s son Koshichirō and possibly even Aisu Ikō himself. He also reputedly received instruction from other preeminent swordsmen of the time, including Matsumoto (Sugimoto) Bizen-no-Kami, Tsukahara Bokuden, Jion, and Iizasa Chōisai. Even if this was not the case, his father likely did, and so in one way or another he was versed in all of the main styles of the day.

According to the *Honchō bugei shōden*, Kamiizumi was matchless in martial skill. Having attained the uppermost level of mastery in the Kage-ryū,
probably around 1540, he created his own school, which he named the Shinkage-ryū.

Kamiizumi had a dozen or so students, most of whom went on to make names for themselves and start their own schools. Among them, Hikita Bungorō (1537–1606), Marume Kurandonosuke (1540–1629), and Yagyū Tajima-no-Kami Muneyoshi (also known as Munetoshi or Sekishūsai, 1527–1606) were particularly influential. For example, Hikita Bungorō, who is said to have been Kamiizumi’s nephew, was employed by the entourage of Toyotomi Hidetsugu (1568–95) and was lavished with gifts in appreciation for his skill.

Marume Kurandonosuke began his martial pilgrimage at age seventeen. During a chance meeting with Kamiizumi, he challenged the legendary warrior to a duel. Although Marume was soundly defeated, his life was spared because Kamiizumi insisted on using bamboo swords (fukuro-shinai) instead of potentially lethal wooden swords or live blades. Although a seasoned warrior, Kamiizumi was reputedly somewhat of a pacifist, and he preferred not to slaughter his challengers if possible. The fortunate Marume immediately became Kamiizumi’s disciple, and after absorbing all his secret knowledge, plus that of twenty other ryūha throughout his distinguished career, he formed the Taisha-ryū.

Yagyū Muneyoshi, yet another celebrated student of Kamiizumi’s, was vastly experienced in combat and indirectly commanded considerable political sway in his later years. Kamiizumi was not his only teacher; he studied under other notable swordsmen such as Tsukahara Bokuden and Itō Ittōsai (1560?–1653?). His martial talents were evident from a young age. According to Hinatsu, “Yagyū Tajima-no-Kami Muneyoshi was born in the Yagyū village in Yamato. His family had lived in the region for generations. . . . In his youth, Muneyoshi was keen on the arts of the sword and spear. . . . Once, Kamiizumi Ise-no-Kami visited the Yagyū village escorted by his students Jingo Izu-no-Kami and Hikita Bungorō. Without delay, Muneyoshi asked the master to teach him swordsmanship, to which Kamiizumi agreed and taught him the art.”

Apparently, Muneyoshi was trounced in a bout with Hikita Bungorō and then by Kamiizumi himself. Kamiizumi then left the village for a period of time on other business, but Hikita remained in his stead. When Kamiizumi returned to check the progress of his new understudy he was apparently pleased with the boy’s improvement: “He commended his proficiency, saying, ‘Muneyoshi’s swordsmanship has arrived at the apex. He has accessed the
essence of the Shinkage style. His skill in swordsmanship is greater than my own.” 

After receiving certification for his mastery after only two years, Muneyoshi was invited to serve the shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiaki, and the notorious daimyo Oda Nobunaga. He chose to serve Nobunaga, and his instruction was eagerly sought by many other personages, including Tokugawa Ieyasu after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Ieyasu bestowed the highest praise upon Muneyoshi, and he was known countrywide for his consummate ability.

I will analyze the contribution made to the development of swordsmanship by Muneyoshi’s son Munenori in the following chapter. Suffice it to say that the impact of the Yagyu line of the Shinkage-ryu in Tokugawa politics and swordsmanship cannot be overstated.

From the Tenshinshoden Katori Shinto-ryu line, Matsumoto Bizen-no-Kami and Tsukahara Bokuden were exalted men in their age. Bokuden learned the Tenshinshoden Katori Shinto-ryu from his adoptive father. As Bokuden journeyed the provinces, talk of his exploits spread far and wide. Hinatsu suggests that he sought instruction from Kamiizumi Ise-no-Kami and successfully mastered his teachings in swordsmanship and spearmanship. As Bokuden was approximately twenty years Kamiizumi’s senior, it is more likely that the opposite is true. In any case, Bokuden then trekked to Kyoto, where he was employed as instructor to Ashikaga Yoshiharu, Ashikaga Yoshiteru, and Ashikaga Yoshiaki—three successive generations of Muromachi shoguns—as well as Takeda Shingen. Having mastered the fabled technique of ichi-no-tachi (foremost sword, also known as hitotsu-no-tachi), Bokuden gathered a massive following, and many of his students became successful in their own rights. For example, Matsuoka Hyogonosuke became shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu’s teacher.

Hinatsu quotes the Kyo-gunkan in his description of Bokuden’s influence: “Tsukahara Bokuden was a skilled swordsman and prodigious warrior. The secret of Bokuden’s swordsmanship is said to be ichi-no-tachi. However, this technique was created by Matsumoto Bizen-no-Kami. In the Kashima-Katori battles, Matsumoto fought with a spear 23 times and collected the heads of 25 warriors of rank and 76 common soldiers. . . . Bokuden also combatted with a spear nine times, and took 21 enemy heads. . . . He was designated ‘heroic warrior.’” 

Bokuden, as with so many swordsmen of his day, pursued divine guidance from the Katori Shrine deities. It was there that he dedicated himself to one thousand days of rigorous training, and legend has it that he gained enlightenment into the secret of ichi-no-tachi. Whether he actually learned it from Matsumoto Bizen-no-Kami, as the Kyo-gunkan and

54 • THE ART OF KILLING
Hinatsu claim, or from his intensive religious training at the Katori Shrine will never be known. However, it was this long-forgotten technique that was acclaimed as being at the crux of Bokuden’s unmitigated skill.

This secret technique was the foundation of his new school, which he named Shintō-ryū (also referred to as Bokuden-ryū). As for the mysterious hitotsu-no-tachi technique, the Honchō bugei shōden records this enigmatic explanation: “Hitotsu-no-tachi is comprised of three levels of hitotsu-no-kurai, hitotsu-no-tachi, and hitotsu-dachi. The first utilizes the timing of heaven. The second uses the vantage of the earth and is the movement that connects heavenly and earthly plains. The third highly secret technique of hitotsu-dachi instills harmony of man and resourcefulness.” By the time he died at the age of eighty-three, Tsukahara Bokuden had amassed numerous followers, some ranking as high as daimyo. He was one of the most important swordsmen of his era and contributed to the status of swordsmanship as a profession.

Finally, from the Nen-ryū line, Itō Ittōsai also stands out as being a giant of his age. Little is known about him except that his legacy culminated in one of the most prominent schools of swordsmanship in Japanese history. Even Hinatsu’s entry on Ittōsai is quite brief: “Itō Ittōsai Kagehisa hailed from Izu. He studied under Kanemaki Jisai and mastered the Chūjō tradition of sword and spear usage. Kagehisa journeyed throughout the country in the quest to develop his sword skills and participated in 33 duels. His techniques were godlike, and his skill so sublime that it defies words.” Ittōsai named his school the Ittō-ryū (One sword school), not as an allegory for using one sword, but from the Taoist philosophy that all things arise from “One” and then return to where they came from.

There were dozens of other warriors of this era, including the legendary Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645), who could be mentioned for their contributions to the systemization of martial art schools, and who also acquired iconic status for their awe-inspiring skill in swordsmanship. Their epic feats are still lionized today in historical novels, traditional plays, manga, movies, and television dramas. Unfortunately, the distinction between fact and fiction has become too blurred over the centuries to know what kind of men they really were. It is clear, however, that swordsmanship to them was more than just a means of killing. It provided them with a life philosophy and was the cradle of their aesthetic ideals and powerful religious sentiments.

With the arrival of “The Great Peace” of Tokugawa Japan, martial arts were consciously and continuously reinvented as vehicles for holistic personal
edification and growth—and later as spiritual sports. As Friday states, in many ways the adherents of these schools in their day became “military anachronisms, out of step with the changing face of warfare in their times. And in their pursuit of this quest through musha shūgyō and other ascetic regimens—their devotion to their arts over conventional military careers and service—they were self-indulgent and quixotic.”

Although not all ryūha were devoted solely to the sword, it was the principal weapon studied by many. Masters of the sword came to symbolize the warrior culture of the late medieval period. Infatuation with the sword became even more fervent during the peaceful Tokugawa period. An exponential proliferation of pseudo-religious ryūha dedicated to kenjutsu led to intensification in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment through swordsman-ship. The function of martial arts took on a new role as samurai tried to come to grips with and reinterpret their raison d’être in an era of relative tranquility. The spread of martial ryūha in the early Tokugawa period was expedited by large numbers of rōnin who had became disenfranchised as a result of years of conflict. They were able to make a living through teaching.

In the following chapter, I will investigate the transition from a time of war to one of peace and examine the advance of kenjutsu as a path of self-cultivation. I will also discuss the “civilizing process” and various innovations in training equipment and methodological approaches.