

**HEIKE MONOGATARI:
THE FIRST SAMURAI
BACKGROUND GUIDE
SSICsim 2018**



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Content Warning: Suicide is mentioned throughout this guide, especially in Honour and Shame, Loyalty and Vassalage, and Memory and Vendetta. Disordered eating is also alluded to in Memory and Vendetta.

Welcome from the Dais

*The Jetavana Temple bells
ring the passing of all things.
Twinned sal trees, white in full flower,
declare the great man's certain fall.¹
The arrogant do not long endure:
They are like a dream one night in spring.
The bold and brave perish in the end:
They are as dust before the wind.*

—*Tale of the Heike, 1:1*²

Fourth month of Jishō 4, Yamashiro Province

Your honours and eminences,

For the reigns of countless emperors, the deities of the Kamo Shrine have watched over the capital, but never, even in this degenerate and disordered age, have they seen such turmoil in the realm. Earlier this year, His Majesty the Emperor Takakura abdicated in favour of the young Antoku, an abdication many have whispered of violating hallowed protocol established both in our narrow realm and in the other realm of China, while his Cloistered Eminence languishes without the honour he merits.

Ruler and subject are at odds. Certain clans lord it over the sovereign and court while others foment rebellion, remembering wrongs done to the restless dead. Obligations arising from loyal service in the past are forgotten, and the great Teaching of the Buddha lies unheeded.

Consider, therefore, your good fortune in being born to your high station and reflect on how easily earthly glory may end. Then act, so that evildoers perish, and the realm may return to peace and order for the benefit of all living things.

Thus have the gods spoken: please mark well their words.

Princess Seishi
Kamo High Priestess

¹ The Jetavana Temple in India was believed to have rung its bells when disciples of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, died. At the Buddha's own death, the yellow blossoms of the sal trees near him were supposed to have turned white. Royall Tyler, footnote to *The Tale of the Heike* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 3.

² All the references to sections of the *Tale* in this guide are based on the *kakuichi-bon* numbering used in both the Royall Tyler and Helen Craig McCullough translations.



October 2018, Toronto

Dear delegates,

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome you to *Heike Monogatari: The First Samurai*, a committee set at a turning point of Japanese history. It is a tale of the beauty and tragedy of a centuries-old court in its last days, of a royal family that would never see the same splendour and influence again in its ensuing millennium of history, as well as of a warrior class whose values and exploits would dominate the land for centuries to come.

While the committee deals with events that are largely historical, it is at heart a literary committee. I have, after all, named it not after the Genpei War but after the *Heike Monogatari*, and similarly, in this guide, I have focused on introducing beliefs and attitudes rather than historical detail. Accordingly, you will find while warfare is important in this committee, legitimacy and influence are even more so, and whether a decision makes dramatic sense may well have as much to bear on its success as its logistics do.

Given the importance of values and principles in this committee, I discuss the historical background of each theme to be addressed in debate in some detail after introducing the topic: there is no need to familiarize yourself with all the themes, since your characters will have some ability to choose which themes with which to engage. I have also bolded important concepts throughout the text for your convenience. It is my sincere hope, however, that the texts referenced throughout the guide can serve you, whether before or after the conference, as an introduction to the world of Japanese literature, and that you can take the time, whether now or years from now, to learn more about topics in the crisis that interested you, for which purpose I have provided an annotated bibliography of sources I found helpful.

Yours humbly,

Zhenglin Liu
Heike Monogatari: The First Samurai
Committee Director, SSICsim 2018



Introduction

*“As they say,” he remarked, “‘Heaven has no mouth and must speak through men.’
The Heike lord it beyond their station. Perhaps heaven has a plan.”
Everyone murmured, “You can’t say that!
The walls have ears! Frightening,
that’s what it is, just frightening!”*

—*Tale of the Heike*, 8:8

It is the fourth month of 1180, and Antoku, a young grandson of the Taira family patriarch Kiyomori, has just ascended to the throne, cementing the clan’s decades-long supremacy. But all is not well. For years, many of the Taira have been conducting themselves poorly and benefiting from nepotistic promotions, alienating the rest of the court. In 1171, for example, one of Kiyomori’s sons gained a prestigious post as a Commander of the palace guard, leaping over several levels of hierarchy and bypassing several more qualified candidates.

One of the candidates passed over was the speaker of the quote above, who became one of the leaders of an 1177 coup against the Taira incited by former emperor Go-Shirakawa. The coup, known as the Shishigatani incident after the villa in which it was planned, was betrayed to Kiyomori before it could be carried out, leading to the death and exile of its leaders. Most of the exiles were pardoned the next year when Kiyomori’s daughter gave birth to Antoku, an event marked with several inauspicious incidents.³ The Taira’s troubles did not end there, however, as Kiyomori intervened in conflicts on the monastic settlement of Mount Hiei, siding with a group of scholars against less educated labourer-practitioners and contributing to heavy casualties and much damage to the mountain’s temple complex.

The death of Kiyomori’s eldest son in 1179 then removed the last moderating influence on Kiyomori’s rage and need to react to all perceived provocation. Feeling slighted by Go-Shirakawa’s reclamation of a province Kiyomori’s late son had governed, he moved against the court, dismissing and banishing 43 high officials including the regent and chancellor, and placed Go-Shirakawa himself under house arrest. He then forced the regnant emperor to abdicate, and it is under these circumstance that the toddler Antoku came to the throne.

In the text of the *Tale*, successful campaigns by leaders of the Minamoto clan would eventually drive the Taira to the western provinces of Japan, where they are wiped out at the battle of Dan-no-Ura. After a further period of internecine conflict, the Minamoto scion Yoritomo goes on to found the warrior government of the Kamakura *bakufu* or shogunate, which would control Japan for the ensuing century and a half. Arguably, the only prominent Taira to get anything out of the war is Kiyomori’s daughter, who is, we are told, driven by the trauma of war to religious salvation. None of this, of course, needs to be the case: all depends on your actions as the great nobles, warriors, and prelates of the age, and the history of Japan is yours to shape for centuries to come.

³ The incident most gossiped about was that the rice pot customarily rolled down the palace roof to announce whether a prince or princess had been born was rolled in the incorrect direction, which gives some sense of what court life was like in that era.



Background Information

The Tale of the Heike as Text

Now the entire recital would have required a time of many nights: therefore Hoichi ventured a question:—

"As the whole of the story is not soon told, what portion is it augustly desired that I now recite?"

The woman's voice made answer:—

"Recite the story of the battle at Dan-no-ura, —for the pity of it is the most deep."

—Lafcadio Hearn, "The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi"

The *Tale of the Heike* is one in a long tradition of Japanese war tales, but it is probably the most triumphant exemplar of the genre. Dating from not long after the Genpei War between the Taira and Minamoto clans that it dramatizes, the work was transmitted just as much through blind performers (like Hoichi above) called *biwa hōshi* as through written texts, and the language of the tale shows this interplay between the prerogatives of educated writers and itinerant artists. As one might expect for a work with such a history, the text comes down to us in a number of versions, of which the literary *Enkyō-bon* and the more performance-ready *Kakuichi-bon* are the most important. In contrast to many epics of Western literature, the *Heike* is neither truly prose nor verse: in performance, different sections of the text are spoken, declaimed on a few pitches, and sung more melodically.

The text has been influential to Japanese culture down to the present day: the dramatic episodes of the work, such as Taira no Kiyomori's humiliation of the artist Giō and execution of the innocent Rokudai, inspired dramatists and artists for centuries to follow, and elements of the *Heike* show up even in contemporary film and TV. Several of the best known annual historical dramas produced by the NHK, for example, have been based on the *Tale*.

How We Got Here

*One man had scaled the heights of glory,
and with him prospered his whole house.*

—Tale of the Heike, 1:5

The *Tale* and our committee both begin during the long decline of the Heian era of Japanese history. The Heian era, which began with the move of the capital to modern-day Kyoto (then known as *Heian-kyō*, the Capital of Tranquil Peace) from Nara in 794, was one of unprecedented courtly splendour and cultural flowering. Its later centuries were nonetheless marred by a series of revolts, most notably the Hōgen (1156) and Heiji (1160) conflicts. By then, there was a sense that all was not right in the harmony of the spheres: the capital's hold over the provinces had weakened, military force became all the more important, and it was believed that the era of *mappō*, the degenerate "end of Buddhist law," had descended upon the world during the eleventh century.

Both Hōgen and Heiji involved the Taira (or Heike, or Heishi, depending on how one reads the Chinese characters of their name) and Minamoto (or Genji) clans, two warrior clans descended distantly from the imperial house. The Hōgen was a move by the deposed Emperor Sutoku to return to power after his father, the retired Emperor Toba, had him replaced by a younger favoured son of Toba who died not long afterwards, allegedly from being cursed by Sutoku. Sutoku rebelled against his successor and his half-brother Go-Shirakawa after their father's death, and both sides



called upon leaders from both the Minamoto and the Taira clans. When Sutoku was defeated, Go-Shirakawa's commanders Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoshitomo had to execute their own uncle and father respectively, horrifying the public, especially since no executions had taken place in Japan for most of the Heian era. Kiyomori and Yoshitomo then allied with courtiers at odds with each other. While Kiyomori left on a pilgrimage in 1160, Yoshitomo initiated the Heiji conflict by killing Kiyomori's ally Shinzei and taking Go-Shirakawa and his son hostage. He was defeated, and his son Yoritomo would have been executed if not for the intervention of Kiyomori's stepmother, the Lady Ike.

Thus, Kiyomori's branch of the Taira, which had been based in the province of Ise for centuries until Kiyomori's father built a Buddhist temple on behalf of Toba (a common way of currying favour) and was invited to the imperial court in return, rose meteorically. In particular, Kiyomori himself enjoyed an unprecedented rise to the post of chancellor without holding several of the usual prerequisites, and built up a powerful network of spies in the capital. His sons also received high offices, while his daughters were given in marriage to prominent noblemen, with one of them becoming empress Kenreimon-in.

The Lay of the Land

'Before the war, it used to be said that Tohoku provided men as soldiers, women as prostitutes, and rice as tribute,' Akasaka wrote.

—Richard Lloyd Parry, "Ghosts of the Tsunami"

Heian, as the only real city in Japan at the time, is likely to be the epicentre of the committee. It was laid out in a grid, with major north-south streets named, and the east-west avenues numbered. The palace was due north of the centre of the grid, though by the twelfth century the population had shifted northeast to the point that the southwest of the city was uninhabited and crumbling.⁴ The surroundings of the city, shown in Map 1 (see Appendix, page 21), included Mount Hiei, a centre of Buddhist temples.

The dwellers in the capital, which consisted largely of officials and labourers serving the court and nobility, considered the provincial population vulgar and uncultured. The Eastern provinces, which are those east of Izu, Kai, and Shinano in Map 2 (see Appendix, page 22), were considered particularly uncouth and primarily exploited for their resources. Other important population centers included Fukuhara, a port in Settsu on the site of modern day Kobe and a centre of Taira power; Nara, the old capital some 40km south of Heian and a prominent centre of Buddhism; and Kamakura, where Minamoto no Yoritomo was based, linked to the capital by the famously picturesque Tōkaidō (Eastern Sea Road).⁵

⁴ William H. McCullough, "The Capital and its Society," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, ed. Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172-3.

⁵ Royall Tyler, Introduction to *The Tale of the Heike* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), xxxiii.



Topics of Discussion

Topic One: Authority and Administration

One of the foremost issues that should be addressed in this committee is how the politics and economy of Japan should operate going forward: who will administer the land, and how? Who will choose each new generation of rulers? To whom will tax revenue flow? Whose call is Japan's foreign policy? The sacred authority of the imperial family, the prestige of the court, the military prowess of the warriors, and the resources and labour of the great temples all merit consideration.

Modes of Power

*The flow of the Kamo River, dice at backgammon, and the monks of Mount Hiei—
these are things beyond my control[.]*

—Retired Emperor Shirakawa, *Tale of the Heike*, 1:14

While the Heian government is nominally led by an emperor, he (and it was always a he after the eighth century, though nothing prevents this from changing during our committee) has limited real power. Emperors were initially assisted by a **regent** known as the *sesshō* or the *kanpaku*, a post monopolized by the Fujiwara family, but this system had weakened by the twelfth century. Instead, real power resides with the **retired emperors**. In this period, it is common for emperors to be crowned at a young age and retire young to wield greater power behind the scenes, and many (including Go-Shirakawa) have become ordained or “cloistered” as novice monks to have the freedom to travel more on pilgrimage but still live at their own estates on their own terms.⁶ They are so prominent in the twelfth century that the system of government is sometimes referred to as *insei*, **cloistered rule**. The non-royal relatives of the emperor on his mother's side, especially his maternal grandfather, also have a great deal of influence—Kiyomori is Antoku's grandfather, and in earlier years the regent had often been the emperor's grandfather as well.

The symbolic authority of the emperor, however, is not to be underestimated. He can hardly be directly criticized, and the persons of the current and retired emperors were sacrosanct. Much of this authority proceeds from the three Sacred Treasures of the **imperial regalia**: a sword, a mirror, and a jewel. The main way the retired or cloistered emperor⁷ uses this authority is by legitimizing the cause of certain warrior clans in conflicts to the court's advantage, since he himself has limited military power beyond the palace guards.⁸ This is often done by defining one side of the conflict as “**enemies of the court**,” justifying war against them. Yet this power is limited, since it is easy for powerful warriors occupying the capital to forcibly move the cloistered emperor around, and he can be forced to completely reverse his decrees if threatened with sufficient martial prowess.

The rest of the court is similarly influential and lacking in real power. It consists of the **civil government** and **palace guard** hierarchy (the two branches of the court, neither held to be inferior to the other). For the most part, the aristocracy was strongly pacifistic, inclined to avoid all-out war at all costs. While they can be fairly informed on military issues, they are generally not competent strategists or commanders, and can be irrationally snobbish in their prejudice against their social inferiors. For this reason, **appointments** to the court hierarchy matter immensely to both the warriors and civilians of the *Tale*, and not just because of the revenue it can entail. Within the court hierarchy, promotions can often be won by wit and learning—historical **precedents**,

⁶ Tyler, introduction to *Heike*, xxvii.

⁷ The reigning emperor was usually too young to do anything.

⁸ Rizō, “Warriors,” 681-2.



especially those in China, carry a lot of weight in major decisions—or even by attainment in the arts. Thus, warriors, who are often looked down upon as being uncouth, have to value achievement in both *bun*, cultural or civil skills, and *bu*, fighting prowess when seeking court appointment.⁹

While much has changed since the court's departure from Nara, which many ascribe to a desire to lessen the influence of Nara's Buddhist clergy in political affairs, religious institutions (many of whose leaders came from the nobility) remain powerful throughout the time of our committee. This power comes less from an ability to censure wrongdoers as one might expect, and more from the fact that prelates are needed to conduct frequent rituals for the state and the military power of the numerous warrior monks. The best of these warrior monks are on par with famous warriors of the great clans, and similar to them in their sensitivity to issues of honour and principle. Despite this, those in religious life are seen as less of a political threat.

Economics and Foreign Relations

*This, our island land of Japan,
Has only sixty-six provinces,
And the Heike ruled over thirty.
Half the realm and more was theirs,
Quite apart from all their estates,
Their countless fields, paddy and dry.
Precious silk, damask, and gauze
Like flowers overflowed their halls.
Horses and carriages thronged their gates,
As though gathered there for market day.
Yangzhou gold, pearls from Jingzhou,
Wujun damasks and Shujiang brocades—
The treasures of the world were theirs.*

—Tale of the Heike, 1:5

For the imperial family and the court, the main source of income¹⁰ is control over land in the provinces, which pays **tax revenue** mostly in the form of rice, supplemented by other goods such as fabrics, minerals, and foods. Nobles vie for lucrative **governorships** over provinces and to receive provinces as *chigyōkoku*, possessory provinces,¹¹ even paying the government for the opportunity. This taxation system, however, has begun to break down under the growth of **shōen**. These are provincial estates to which local magnates can commend their holdings, giving the estate a share of revenue from the land in exchange for patronage and support, and they are becoming an important source of revenue for the aristocracy and religious institutions. Control over land is also one of the main ways warriors can be rewarded for service. Given these varying and growing demands, the allocation of revenues from the land is another important issue for the committee's consideration.

The future of Japan's foreign relations and international trade practices are also up for debate. While the era of Japan's tributary relationship with China ended centuries ago, China under the

⁹ Paul Varley, *Warriors of Japan as Portrayed in the War Tales* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994), 68, 149.

¹⁰ For the entire country, commodities such as rice, precious metals, and silk were the main currency, with coinage only really used by the wealthier classes.

¹¹ Dana Morris, "Land and Society," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, ed. Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246-8.



Southern Song dynasty has remained Japan's main trading partner, with the Taira dominating the Japanese end of the relationship and possessing a number of trading bases in Shikoku and Honshu. Japan exports minerals such as sulfur, as well as luxury items such as gold and silver lacquerwork and swords, receiving prestigious Chinese goods including medicines, porcelains, fabrics, books, and coins in return. In 1172, by responding to the Song Emperor Xiaozong's request for an envoy, Kiyomori also reopened formal relations between the states. Some aristocrats saw this as humiliating for Japan,¹² but it presumably improved communications between the nations, affording better access to Chinese academic knowledge, which was respected in areas like astrology and physiognomy. Trade with Koryeo Korea, meanwhile, had ended earlier in the century due to a rise in Korean militarism.

Topic Two: The Conduct of War

The late Heian era is when elite warriors of the great clans of Japan began to have the traits of the *samurai* of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century, amassing troops of followers and gaining increasing political power. The preceding centuries of peace, however, mean that no strong consensus had yet developed on how warriors might face each other honourably yet strategically. Nonetheless, there is near-universal concern with loyalty and one's reputation, raising many questions delegates will have the opportunity to address: are there tactics so destructive that they indicate a fundamental disregard for the most valued aspects of society? Under what circumstances is survival better than death? And is it ever appropriate to turn against one's liege?

The Practice of Warfare

*Arrows rained down in volleys and countervolleys.
Some carried the wounded off on their shoulders;
some, only lightly wounded, fought on;
some, mortally struck, lay dead or dying.
Pairs grappled side by side, fell, stabbed each other to death.
Here a man pinned another's head down and cut it off;
there a man's head rolled from his shoulders.
Neither side betrayed any sign of weakness,
and the Genji main force by itself seemed far from sure to prevail.*

—Tale of the Heike, 9:12

By the time of the Genpei War (1180-1185), warriors have become lightly armoured mounted professionals, who may be followed into battle with one or two attendants on foot. A battle usually begins with an exchange of arrow fire that continues as the two armies approach each other, and only becomes close range combat with swords and daggers later on. In the close-range stage of battle, fighters on opposing sides often pair up, so that each has one opponent they try to kill. A variety of strategies such as surprise attacks and encirclement are possible, and even a small detachment of some ten warriors can be an effective force. Given that most buildings are wooden, arson is especially common and can have devastating effects,¹³ and warriors sometimes set fire to their own bases so that they cannot be used by their opponents. Naval battles are also possible, but

¹² G. Cameron Hurst, III, "Insei," in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2, ed. Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 636.

¹³ And not always intentionally!



the Taira and other western warriors have much more experience than eastern warriors, who are better in land battles.

Armies generally gather gradually as a campaign goes on and leaders of each side call on major vassals who might each command several hundred or thousand followers. Some of these vassals might be bound to their commanders by strong relationships of loyalty, but often leaders from more remote provincial areas simply side with whichever side seems more likely to strengthen their power in their home regions. Warriors on campaign often live off the land, robbing or confiscating property from peasants in the area, frequently leading the civilian population in conflict zones to flee elsewhere. It is thus up to you to determine whether this constitutes an unacceptable abuse of the populace, or a necessary sacrifice in service of the emperor and the greater good.

Honour and Shame

“A man of power may do little himself,” he said, “yet gain glory through his retainers.

The likes of us must win glory on our own.

Here we are, with the enemy before us, yet we have not shot a single arrow.

I cannot stand it. I will steal into their fortress and shoot one,

and since I have next to no chance of coming back alive,

I want you to stay behind and bear witness to my deed.”

—Kawara no Tarō, a Genji retainer, Tale of the Heike, 9:11

While the warrior ethics associated with the samurai of the later centuries is not yet strictly codified, **honour** is already an all-pervasive concern for both warriors and civilians in the time of the Genpei, especially since those renowned for their bravery and achievements may be richly rewarded. Most characters are also enormously concerned with shame and humiliation, which can arise simply from being seen in reduced circumstances unfitting to one’s station.

In combat, warriors seeking honour **announce their names** and their exploits or the exploits of famous ancestors to draw worthy foes, since those who kill accomplished warriors are more likely to be rewarded and celebrated. There is also competition to be the **first to enter the fray**, to cross a river to meet the foe, and the like. Some even defy their commander in such situations. That said, it is unclear under what circumstances one is obliged to charge ahead: being strategic and being unafraid to retreat may be equally valid. **Contests of skill** also sometimes occur on the battlefield, where one side may challenge the other to shoot a particularly difficult target or display their martial ability in some other way, which could so enthrall the combatants as to leave them open to attack. Throughout a battle, warriors may also take care not to display physical weakness and to ensure that their exploits are witnessed by allies and followers. After the battle, it is standard to **keep the heads** of one’s vanquished foes as trophies, and they are exhibited or paraded around after practically every major battle, though not all agree it is appropriate to exhibit the heads of prominent nobility and those to whom the court is indebted.

Avoiding **shame**, then, is important when death and defeat enter the picture, and a heroic death can ensure that one’s family is rewarded afterward.¹⁴ Broadly, death in battle is considered honourable and fitting, and certainly preferred to capture. Many prefer to die undefeated by suicide

¹⁴ Varley, 101.



rather than be killed by foes if one is incapacitated or surrounded, especially if those foes are of lower social standing. Thus, a number of wounded warriors commit suicide in almost every battle, and some warriors kill their wounded adult children or followers when the alternative was to abandon them to be killed by the enemy. *Seppuku* is a common form of suicide, but by no means the only one. Some also consider it admirable to choose to die alongside one's companions.

If suicide is not possible, facing execution bravely is also admired, and to this end assassins generally confess their intentions when it becomes clear that they had no chance of fulfilling them. For the winning party in a dueling pair of warriors in battle, meanwhile, it is honourable to permit the defeated a reprieve for a last request or prayer. Flight, however, is not necessarily shameful, especially when it can be argued that someone needed to stay alive to **tell the exploits** of the defeated or to pray for their happiness in the next life. To abandon a liege to die, however, is an act for which a warrior can be shamed for the rest of their life.

Loyalty and Vassalage

*[T]o seek shelter with a stranger under the same tree confirms a bond from past lives;
to drink with another from the same stream likewise reveals a tie from earlier births.
Consider, then, all of you, that yours is no passing deference to this house,
but that generation after generation you have been our retainers.
Some among you are close relatives, hence indissolubly bound to us;
others are beholden to us for liberal favor over the generations.
Then, when we prospered, you lived off our bounty.
Now, how could you fail to requite the debt you owe?*

—Taira no Munemori to his followers, Tale of the Heike, 7:20

Loyal service to one's lord is another important aspect of warrior conduct, and the idealized relationship between lord and vassal is much celebrated. Perfect vassals are ever-ready to help, follow, and even die for their lords, and the followers of a leader who died violently may try to follow them in death or enter religious life to pray for his happiness in the world to come. This means that the death of a leader can sometimes lead warriors to fight more aggressively and fearlessly, and it is perfectly acceptable to exercise trickery in service of one's lord. Of course, this relationship runs both ways, and a lord needs to reward followers generously and do everything necessary to maintain loyalty. As well, in practice, vassals betraying their lieges is not unheard of, even at the most crucial and urgent moments.

Topic Three: Memory and Vendetta

Yes, the angry dead inspire fear.

—Tale of the Heike, 3:1

In light of the recent Heiji and Hōgen conflicts, as well as the more subdued disorder of the Shishigatani plot, and as the body count of the crisis itself piles up, delegates will need to address the resentment of both the living and the dead. What forms of revenge are appropriate? What wrongs need to be avenged? Should the wronged and angry dead be celebrated or forgotten?

Revenge is an important motivator for warriors of the Genpei: past humiliation or defeat is ample grounds for taking up arms against someone; and avenging parents, relatives, and commanders is almost mandatory. This frequently means that the winning side in a conflict would need to



exterminate not only the warriors on the defeated side, but their children as well, for fear of vengeance.

Even in death, the resentment of the defeated haunts the living, and the committee would do well to address the casualties both of past conflicts and this one. The ghosts or *onryō* of the late Emperor Sutoku¹⁵ and his ally Fujiwara no Yorinaga, both of whom died during the Hōgen Rebellion, are particularly feared. It is notable that spirits of the wronged and anguished living, such as the exiled Shishigatani plotters, can also possess others and cause disaster.¹⁶ The spirits of those who have killed themselves (often by excessive fasting) to extract revenge in the afterlife, meanwhile were particularly fearsome. One way spirits can be drawn in *or* pacified is by the telling of their story. Fujiwara no Yukinaga, the alleged author of the *Tale* and the son of the chamberlain Fujiwara no Yuktaka, who appears as a character, was said to have been possessed as a child by a number of spirits including Sutoku. Meanwhile, the ghost of the Heike dead from the battle of Dan-no-Ura, who were thought to haunt the Straits of Shimonoseki,¹⁷ are the audience of Hoichi's performance described by Hearn at the start of this guide (and later rip off his ears when a well-intentioned priest takes him back among the living). Another way to pacify these spirits, then, is to grant them posthumous honours or to enshrine them as protector deities.

Topic Four: The Life Well Lived

Love, beauty, and salvation: these intensely personal concerns could be of great public and political significance in Heian Japan. The way they are approached, however, differs widely both between and within the courtly and warrior classes. Should defining the latest trends in the arts and literature remain the purview of the aristocracy, or can the warrior class also contribute meaningfully? Whose prerogative is it to sponsor and direct the activities of religious institutions? And should concern for one's loved ones be subordinated to a warrior's honour and each individual's pursuit of eternal happiness?

Culture and Taste

...the world is a world of tears

And the burdens of mortality touch the heart.

—Aeneas, *The Aeneid* (trans. Robert Fagles), I. 461-2

Throughout the Heian era, artistic accomplishment and a discerning aesthetic, as epitomized by the *Tale of Genji* and the **imperial poetry anthologies** published every so often, can be real assets for both civilian aristocrats and warriors. Not only do being cultured and tasteful lead to more positive assessments of one's overall ability and character, but successful displays of refinement

¹⁵ An urban legend claims that an earthquake struck the Kantō just as a scene from the NHK's *Taira no Kiyomori* depicting Sutoku's transformation into an *onryō* aired. Matthew Meyer, "Sutoku Tennō," last modified October 30, 2015. <http://yokai.com/sutokutenou/>.

¹⁶ For example, in the *Tale of Genji*, the spirit of Prince Genji's then-living abandoned lover, the lady Rokujō, caused Genji's new mistress Aoi to become mortally ill. This occurred without the corporeal Rokujō's awareness, and she was horrified to discover what happened.

¹⁷ It was also thought that the Heike dead from that day took the form of crabs in the Shimonoseki area, where the battle of Dan-no-Ura occurred, since those crabs often have markings on their shells resembling a warrior's face. Fishermen fearful of ghosts unwittingly practiced artificial selection for these crabs by returning caught specimens to the sea, so that face-like markings became ever more common, and that species of crab is now known as the Heike crab.



can even lead to promotion and wealth. Being recognized for one's artistic accomplishment, for example by inclusion in an imperial anthology, brings enormous honour, and in any event it is always a shame to kill an accomplished artist in battle.

The most prominent arts practiced by nobility are poetry and **music**, and members of the Taira (who are cultured courtiers as much as they are warriors) number among the most successful practitioners of each. The main form of poetry composed is the *tanka* type of *waka*, which had five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables each and generally rely on puns and metaphors or analogies based on natural imagery for their effect. The composition and performance of poetry is appropriate at most emotional occasions, while music is important both to express emotion and as courtly entertainment. Performers include both accomplished amateurs as well as professionals such as *shirabyōshi* dancers, women who perform a variety of songs, instrumental music, and dance and manage their own careers. Both poetry and music can be linked to religion: songs such as *rōei* and *imayō* often have religious themes, and the first *tanka* was allegedly composed by the god Susano-o. Composing poetry at a shrine is a way to worship the gods of Shinto, at whose shrines *kagura* dancing is also an important practice, and conversely hampering the arts can be a grave sin.

Taste, meanwhile, consists not only of an awareness of the charming aspects of nature and daily life, but also a sensitivity to the sorrow of things, *mono no aware*. Sad occurrences to be remarked on might include the decline of the prosperous, final meetings between people who care deeply for each other, the predicament of those torn between duties (for example to family and honour), and the premature death of the particularly virtuous or honourable. More broadly, sorrowful themes that dominate the thoughts of the characters and serve as aesthetic focuses of the *Tale* include the **impermanence** of all things, the capriciousness of **fate**, the horror of being in the era of *mappō*, and the inevitability of suffering as a consequence of sin or bad **karma** arising from one's own actions and those of one's ancestors. Though there is some notion that tears convey weakness, even warriors and religious practitioners weep freely. While sensitivity to the pathos of a situation is regarded as an upper-class trait, the fates of public figures may be an emotional issue for commoners as well.

Religion and the Supernatural

"If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name, even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment. Excluded, however, are those who commit the five gravest offences and abuse the right Dharma."

—*Amida Buddha*, Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life

Buddhism and Shinto are both important forces in Heian life, and both are associated with influential institutions. Broadly speaking, Buddhism supplies beliefs about morality and the afterlife, and Buddhist practices are undertaken for the sake of both this life and the one to come, while Shinto practices are mostly pursued for blessings and good fortune in this life.

In Heian Buddhism, the tenets of the **Four Noble Truths**, that existence is suffering arising from craving and clinging and can be ended through enlightenment by following the **Eightfold Path**, are expressed in **Pure Land** beliefs. That is, believers seek to escape the endless cycle of reincarnation in various unpleasant conditions by being reborn in the Pure Land created by the



buddha Amida, where one could reach enlightenment regardless of past sins, through faith in Amida's saving power.¹⁸ To this end, calling on Amida with the phrase *namu Amida butsu* is tremendously important, and the practice has been adopted by the warrior class to the extent that many Taira warriors and ladies will kill themselves with total confidence after calling the name ten or a hundred times. Success in attaining rebirth in the Pure Land is thought to be marked by a lingering odour of sanctity and an auspicious purple cloud associated with the heavenly host, and records are kept celebrating the fortunate few believed to be reborn in the Pure Land.

Another universal belief was in karma and reincarnation, and those in dire straits are often consoled by being told that their suffering resulted from misdeeds in past lives and that there was nothing they could do now. This is not always a negative thought, since suffering in this life for past misdeeds means one will suffer less in future lives. Similarly, an individual or clan's good fortune is thought to be finite, and there is little one can do once it has been exhausted. Belief in reincarnation, meanwhile, does not excuse one from trying to live this life well, since the brevity and fragility of human life, as well as the rarity of contact with Buddhist wisdom, is widely emphasized.

The Buddhist clergy is divided into a number of different sects, which have had a long history of fairly secular conflicts: the rivalry between Enryakuji on Mount Hiei and Kōfukuji in Nara was particularly bitter. Both men and women enter Buddhist religious life in a variety of situations, such as in attempts to earn the **merit** needed for a miraculous recovery from illness (as Kiyomori did in 1168), or after experiencing traumatic events like the loss of loved ones or station. To some extent, those in religious life cease to be part of their clan and can no longer participate in military activity, meaning that members of defeated lineages might be spared if they become monks.

Shinto deities, who are often manifestations of elements of nature, meanwhile, are generally more human than the transcendent deities of Buddhism,¹⁹ and are thought of as literally residing in their shrines. Often, a noble house is associated with certain temples or shrines. The most important of these associations are that of the imperial family with the Ise shrine to the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is said to be the progenitor of that line; that of the Genji with Iwashimizu, which houses their patron god Hachiman; and that of the Heike with Itsukushima near Hiroshima, a shrine which is still famous today for its *torii* gates that seem to float over water. Other important shrines included Kumano, Sumiyoshi, and Kasuga. Most of these shrines are popular **pilgrimage** destinations, and one can curry favour with a great clan by visiting their temple.

Generally, the Buddhist and Shinto clergies have coexisted peacefully and have even collaborated.²⁰ It is usually thought that Shinto divinities are local manifestations of universal

¹⁸ The scriptural quote at the start of this section suggested that those depraved enough to commit the sins of patricide, matricide, injuring a buddha, killing an arahant, and causing a major schism could not be saved by the Pure Land. The profoundly optimistic *Lotus Sutra*, a key text of Heian Buddhism, however, suggests that even these sinners could attain happiness, even if they had to undergo eons of suffering first.

¹⁹ The god of the Ashigara Mountains, for example, was said to have written a poem divorcing his wife when he returned from a visit to China and was disappointed to find her plump and pretty instead of pining away. *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 10:6.

²⁰ The imperial princess who served as the High Priestess of the Kamo Shrine in Heian was a rare exception in that she was not allowed to take part in Buddhist practices. The justification for this was that Buddhism, with its focus on death and the next life, was "polluting" in a Shinto context, in the same way as being in the presence of a corpse restricted one's participation in Shinto rituals.



Buddhist divinities, and so temples and shrines are often associated with one another. Mount Hiei, for example, has a number of shrines, enabling the monks to threateningly parade palanquins containing the divine presence when they feel wronged.

Marriage and Family

*“Yes, the true tie binds parent to child.
Why, people are right to have children!”
The two shared the same carriage home,
just as when they had come that morning.
For the women there, Naritsune
might as well have returned from the dead.
They clustered around him and wept for joy.*

—Tale of the Heike, 2:5

The role of family is another aspect of life that can be transformed by social upheaval. While being able to fight without any concern for the safety of one’s family is a warrior ideal, the courtly upper class has strong bonds with their children and spouses. Filial piety is highly valued, and many characters express the desire to die with one’s parent or child rather than live on. Nonetheless, it is considered sinful to be concerned with one’s family instead of one’s own salvation at the moment of death, but many couples exchange remarks about wanting to be reborn “on the same lotus throne” in the Pure Land. It is also common for a bereaved spouse, parent, or child to enter religious life to pray for the deceased.

It is especially common for widows to become nuns,²¹ or, in more extreme cases, to kill themselves. This might be surprising considering the relatively high degree of independence Heian women have due to the pacifistic society of much of the era, and due to the practice of **uxorilocal marriage** where a young couple lived with the parents of the bride rather than the groom.²² Of course, it is still with good reason that the dancer Hotoke said “[w]e women can so seldom follow our wishes!” While many great writers and performers of the Heian court are women, female members of military families have no real opportunity to become involved in leadership and strategy, and there is certainly the sense among warriors that women are more prone to emotional irrationality than men. How these views can be reconciled is one more issue for your consideration.

²¹ While there were no large monastic communities for women like there were for men, women still enjoyed some degree of spiritual independence. While the Buddhist canon generally barred women from attaining buddhahood (or rebirth into a variety of classes of deities), the *Lotus Sutra* points out that for someone with the merits needed for buddhahood, the configuration of one’s body was no barrier at all, giving the story of a dragon princess transforming into a man for an instant to awaken as a buddha.

²² This made political ties between fathers- and sons-in-law and between maternal grandparents and grandchildren especially important. McCullough, “Capital,” 136-42.



Character Summaries

The Taira

Taira no Kiyomori, the head of the Taira clan and the grandfather of the Emperor, is the most powerful non-royal in the land, with vast resources and the loyalty of troops throughout Japan. In his mind, his military service to Go-Shirakawa has entitled him to imperial favour no matter what, and he has used this to elevate all his relations. Trade is another of his priorities, as is satisfying his personal desires: by this point in his career, he is prone to excess and is known for dismissing the celebrated dancer Giō on a whim.

Nii-no-Ama, formerly known as Taira no Tokiko, is Kiyomori's wife and a nun. As the respected matriarch of the Taira, she cares deeply for her husband and children's welfare, and is influential in their deliberations. She has joint command of Kiyomori's troops, and her recently deceased sister, Kenshunmon-in, was the favourite consort of Go-Shirakawa.

Taira no Tadanori is the younger brother of Kiyomori and one of his leading generals, as well as a talented poet.

Kenreimon-in, a daughter of Kiyomori, is a consort of Emperor Takakura, and the honoured and devout mother of the young emperor. Her considerable influence lies in her close relationship with him and with her father-in-law Go-Shirakawa, as well as in her ability to mediate between the court and the rest of the Taira clan.

Taira no Munemori, the third son of Kiyomori and his oldest surviving son, is well-trusted by his father and is likely to succeed him. Not a particularly talented general, Munemori sparked the Shishigatani plot when he became Commander of the palace guards contrary to protocol.

Taira no Tomomori, the fourth son of Kiyomori and the second oldest still alive, is the most able commander among the Taira of his generation.

Dainagon-no-suke, the wife of Kiyomori's fifth son Taira no Shigehira, is a nurse to the young Emperor Antoku and has a close relationship with Kenreimon-in. She commands the troops of her serially unfaithful husband.

The Minamoto

Minamoto no Yoritomo is the oldest surviving son of Minamoto no Yoshitomo, the leader of the Minamoto clan until he was defeated by Taira no Kiyomori in the Heiji conflict and killed. Yoritomo was only spared and exiled to the province of Izu at the intercession of Ike no Zenni, Kiyomori's stepmother. Though he is willing to work with his half-brothers, he is distrustful of them on the grounds of the threat they may pose to his ambitions.

Minamoto no Yoshitsune is a younger half-brother of Yoritomo and a capable warrior. Known for his deep care towards his followers and his willingness to listen to them on matters of strategy, he commands an extraordinary degree of loyalty from them.

Minamoto no Noriyori is another younger half-brother of Yoritomo and also a capable commander, though he is more traditional in his strategies than Yoshitsune.



Kiso no Yoshinaka is a cousin of Yoritomo, Yoshitsune, and Noriyori. Raised in the remote mountains of Shinano province, he was not really impacted by the fall of Yoshitomo and has a strong base of support in Shinano.

Kakumei is Yoshinaka's scribe, a strategist "versed in both letters and war"²³ and descended from a scholarly court family. He trained as a monk in Nara until he was forced to flee for speaking out against Kiyomori.²⁴ He guides the politically inexperienced and uncultured Yoshinaka while sharing control of his troops.

The Court

Cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa has been the dominant force in the imperial family since his retirement 22 years ago. He believes in maintaining the power of the imperial court and limiting prominent warrior clans even as he relies on them for military power by playing them off against each other, or "using the barbarian to control the barbarian." He is not above subterfuge, as seen when he instigated the Shishigatani conspiracy.

Fujiwara no Motofusa was regent for Emperor Takakura. A proud man who lost much of his inheritance to his Taira sister-in-law Moriko through the machinations of Kiyomori, he has had a tense relationship with the Taira, culminating in 1169 when he unhorsed Taira no Sukemori, a teenaged grandson of Kiyomori, for failing to stop respectfully for his retinue. Sukemori retaliated, wrecking Motofusa's carriage and cutting off his attendants' hair. He is close to Go-Shirakawa and might use the cloistered emperor to take revenge against the Taira and restore himself to glory.

Fujiwara no Motomichi is the current regent for Emperor Antoku. He is connected to Kiyomori through his father Motozane's principal wife, the aforementioned Taira no Moriko, a daughter of Kiyomori. For this reason, Go-Shirakawa is wary of Motomichi's family, and recently confiscated their estates that had passed into Taira control through Moriko.

The Buddhist Clergy

Meiun is the abbot of the Buddhist centre of Mount Hiei, whose monks were wont to air grievances by marching down on the capital with holy palanquins, a practice often powerful enough to change court decisions. He was dismissed by Go-Shirakawa and would have been exiled if not for demonstrations by the Hiei monks, who were very loyal to him, after the monks retaliated against the depredations of a governor favoured by Go-Shirakawa. He was reinstated after the resignation and death of his replacement, Go-Shirakawa's brother Kakukai.²⁵

Mongaku is a wandering ascetic and former warrior of the imperial guard. His impossibly austere lifestyle and unusually deep faith—when exiled for bothering the court with demands for temple restorations and given the chance to write to his allies, he addressed his letter to the bodhisattva Kannon worshipped at Kiyomizu-dera—makes him most likely to have supernatural powers. He has the ear of Yoritomo, with whom he is prone to discussing the decadence of the Taira.

²³ *Heike* 7:5.

²⁴ He was writing in accordance with the consensus of the Nara monks, but was still in danger from Kiyomori. Historically his escape occurred a little later in 1180 than the start of our committee, but we will overlook this.

²⁵ Historically this occurred in 1181, but for our purposes we will treat this as something that occurred before the start of committee.



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Further Reading

Literary Works

These are some of the most important texts of 8th to 13th century Japan, and are generally useful for understanding how people thought, spoke, and behaved in the era of our committee. Most of them are available through the Toronto Public Library system.

The Tale of Heike: Familiarizing yourself with the *Tale* is probably the best thing you can do to prepare for this committee, and you should definitely read at least the fairly comprehensive Wikipedia summary. [This old translation](#) is not terrible and has useful notes, but it is very turgid. It also numbers sections differently from the other major translations. If you try to get a more recent translation at the library, you may encounter the versions by Helen Craig McCullough or Royall Tyler. The Toronto Public Library website has an e-book of the latter, and I used it because I liked how it formatted spoken, declaimed, and sung sections differently, but the former is also very popular and beautiful.

The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari): Probably the most famous work of Heian literature, this novel by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu follows the amorous misadventures of an illegitimate prince and is useful for understanding some aspects of court life. Unfortunately, it contains many incidents that would be considered sexual violence in a contemporary context.

The Pillow Book (Makura no Shoshi): A collection of witty observations on court life and poetic practice written by a rival of Murasaki with a very different aesthetic.

A Tale of Flowering Fortunes (Eiga Monogatari): A chronicle of the Heian court in its heyday, this source on court life has more of a political bent.

Tosa Nikki, *Sarashina Nikki*, *Izumi Shikibu Nikki*, *Kagerō Nikki*: These are some of the best-known exemplars of the Heian genre of literary diaries. All have a focus on aristocratic life and values: the *Tosa Nikki* and *Sarashina Nikki* deal with travel through Japan, the *Izumi Shikibu Nikki* deals with romance, and the *Kagerō Nikki* deals with religion.

The Tale of Ise (Ise Monogatari), *Tales of Yamato* (Yamato Monogatari): These two works dealing with court life are *uta monogatari*, stories consisting of many *waka* connected by prose. *The Tale of Ise* has a more romantic focus.

Man'yōshū, *Kokin Wakashū*: These are two of the most famous imperially commissioned poetry anthologies of the era and give a sense of the poetic aesthetics of the day.

Hōgen monogatari, *Heiji monogatari*, *Azuma Kagami*: The first two of these warrior narratives chronicle the conflicts leading up to the Genpei War, and the *Azuma Kagami* documents the early history of the Kamakura era that followed. These are probably difficult to find and might not be that useful beyond giving deepening your understanding of warrior culture.

Konjaku Monogatari, *Uji Shūi Monogatari*: These *kwaidan* collections give a sense of medieval Japanese beliefs about the supernatural.

The Lotus Sutra: The centerpiece of Japanese Buddhism in the Heian era.



Histories

These might be less readily available.

The Cambridge History of Japan: Volume II of this seven-volume collection details the political, military, and cultural history of the Heian era.

A History of Japan, George B. Sansom: The first volume covers events till 1334.

Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan, Karl F. Friday: This work covers both how battles were fought and the societal context of warrior life.

Web Sources

[Yokai Tales, Hyakumonogatari](#): These collections of stories are of dubious academic rigour but make for a fun read if you are interested in folk tales of Japanese monsters.

Michael Watson, “[Heike Monogatari](#)”: This collection of links by a scholar at Meiji Gakuin University could be a useful starting point for online research, and his [list](#) of the many Noh plays dealing with the Genpei War may be of especial interest if you like theatre or want to understand what was felt to be dramatically apt in medieval Japan.

Media

NHK’s Taiga Dramas: At least three of these year-long period productions have been about the Genpei War. From what I can tell, *Yoshitsune* (2005) is the best of these. [Its treatment of the Heike defeat](#) is particularly stunning (this link goes to a two-part clip of the scene, sadly marred with some weird captions by the YouTube poster), and most of the episodes can be found easily on YouTube.

Recitations of the *Tale*: A number of performances of Heike excerpts accompanied by the biwa lute are available on YouTube. Conceivably these vary in their degree of faithfulness to traditional practice but [this](#) recitation of the battle of Dan-no-Ura seems quite good.

Video games and board games: There are allegedly a number of games set during the Genpei War. As I have not had the fortune of encountering any of them, I will leave them for you to google.



Appendix

Nomenclature and Onomastics

Throughout our committee sessions, the names of characters will be given in the standard Japanese order of the time, as was done in this guide. For most noblemen and high-class warriors, this was the surname, followed by the possessive *no*, then the given name. So the name ‘Taira no Kiyomori,’ for example, is Kiyomori of the Taira family. Lower class warriors might have their hometown in place of a surname, and might have a nickname or a name indicating order of birth (such as “Tarō,” eldest son) instead of or in addition to a given name. Buddhist clergy took new names when ordained, usually made up of religious concepts expressed in two Chinese characters. It was considered rude to refer to women by their given names, so titles based on their office-bearing male relatives or their places of residence were used instead. In the case of empresses, queen mothers, and great princesses, this would be the name of an imperial palace. The title of Kenreimon-in, for example, means something to the effect of “the lady of the palace at the Gate of Establishing Courtesy.”

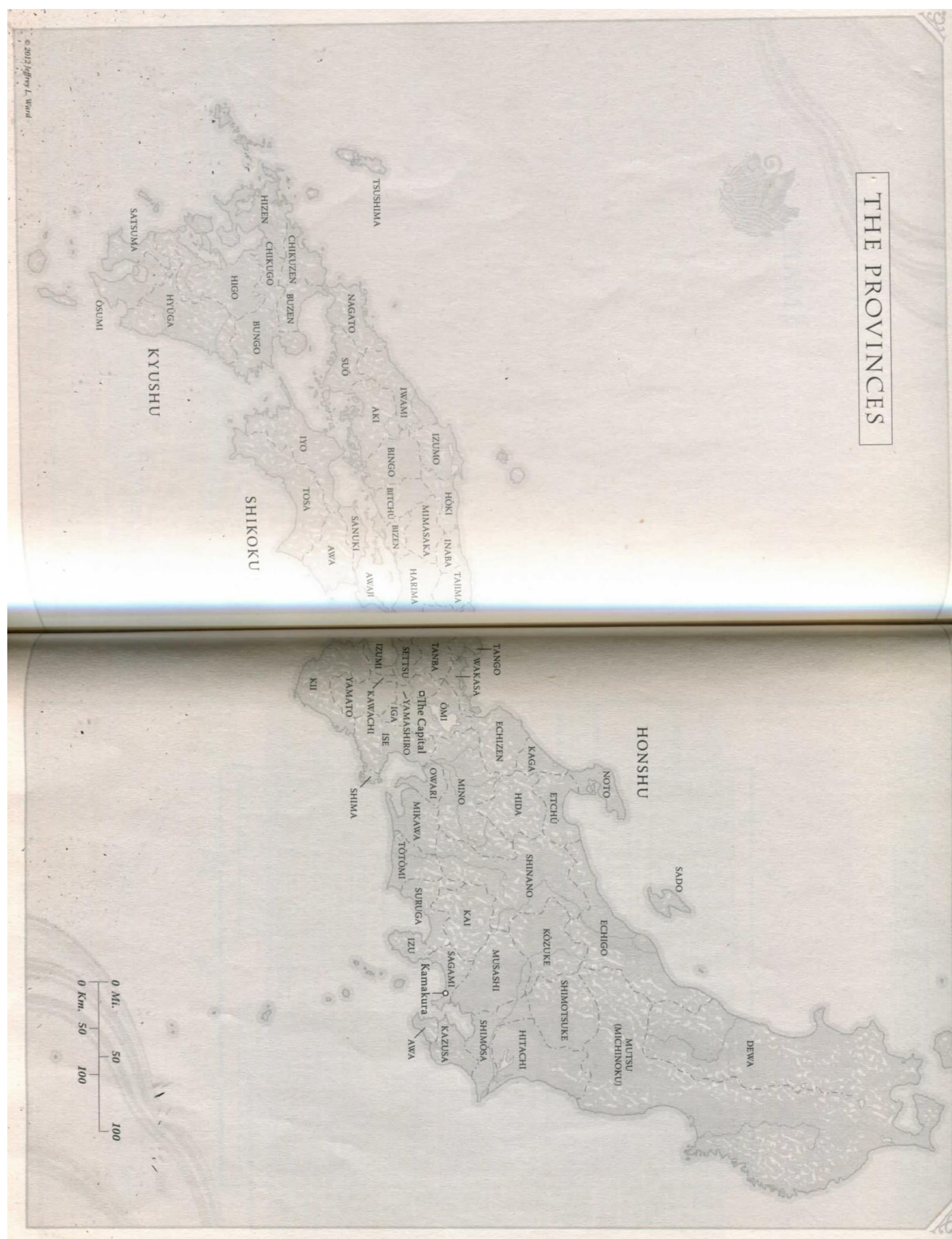
Members of the imperial family had no last name, and distant imperial relatives were given surnames, usually Taira, Minamoto, Ariwara, or Tachibana, to remove them from the imperial line. This was not a punitive or shameful occurrence, but rather allowed those removed to have a court career on their own terms and reduced the drain on imperial finances. Branches of these families were indicated by the name of the last emperor from which the branch descended: the main Minamoto characters in our committee, for example, descend from Emperor Seiwa (lived 850-878), while the main Taira characters descend from Emperor Kanmu (lived 735-806).

Aristocrats at court were divided into nine ranks, each of which was subdivided into the Junior and Senior levels. An important threshold was the Third Rank, in and above which noblemen were known as *kugyō*, “senior nobles,” while the privilege of entering the imperial privy chamber was another major threshold for lower ranked nobles. Highest ranked were the chancellor and the three ministers below him: the minister of the right, the minister of the left, and the palace minister.

As for chronology, years were generally referred to by the regnal period name (*nengō*), a title that was generally changed with the accession of each new emperor and also for inauspicious years or occurrences, possibly to put some mental distance between them and the present. As with the names of emperors and mansions, these tended to have edifying names. Thus, 1180 was known as Jishō 4, the fourth year of the era of “Sustaining Regulation.” Months were numbered First through Twelfth with intercalary months inserted when the lunar calendar fell behind the movement of the sun and the seasons, and the day was divided into twelve hours named after the twelve animals of the zodiac.



Maps



Map 1: Provinces of Heian Japan²⁶

²⁶ Royall Tyler, notes to *The Tale of the Heike* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 722-3.





Map 2: Heian and its Vicinities²⁷

²⁷ Tyler, 727.

