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Reunification of Japan

The first Europeans to arrive in Japan were Portuguese traders who landed on the island of Tanegashima off the southern coast in 1543. This first cultural confrontation between Japan and the West was a bewildering experience for both sides. As one observer at Tanegashima remarked whimsically of the Portuguese:

These men are traders. . . . They understand to a certain degree the distinction between Superior and Inferior, but I do not know whether they have a proper sense of ceremonial etiquette. They eat with their fingers instead of with chopsticks such as we use. They show their feelings without any self-control. They cannot understand the meaning of written characters. They are people who spend their lives roving hither and yon. They have no fixed abode and barter things which they have for those they do not, but withal they are a harmless sort of people.¹

Jesuit missionaries began arriving in Japan in 1549 and as part of their proselytizing campaign made a genuine effort to understand Japanese manners and customs. It was no easy matter, and one Jesuit in exasperation finally concluded of the Japanese:

They have rites and ceremonies so different from those of all the other nations that it seems they deliberately try to be unlike any other people. The things which they do in this respect are beyond imagining and it may truly be said that Japan is a world the reverse of Europe; everything is so different and opposite that they are like us in practically nothing. . . . Now all this would not be surprising if they were like so many barbarians, but what astonishes me is that they behave as very prudent and cultured people in all these matters.²

As they became more familiar with the basic organization of society and government, the Jesuits began to discern institutions that were

in many respects comparable to ones that had existed in medieval Western Europe: a ruling class composed of military leaders and their followers, practices of vassalage and enfeoffment, a military code of honor, and the fragmentation of political authority. Such similarities came to provide the basis for many subsequent comparisons between the feudalism of Western Europe and of Japan. Karl Marx pushed this comparison perhaps as far as anyone else when he wrote in *Das Kapital*: "Japan, with its purely feudal organization of landed property and its developed *petite culture*, gives a much truer picture of the European middle ages than our own history books. . . ."

The Warring States Period, 1467–1568

When the first Europeans arrived, Japan was in the midst of a full-blown feudal period, marked by continuous, widespread warfare. During this so-called Warring States Period, which lasted from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, power was fragmented to an extraordinary degree. It was "a world without a center."³ Not only had the authority of the central government dissolved, but regional powerholders too had lost their positions.

Power, in short, lay at the local level. The most important institution was the small feudal state dominated by the local lord and his band of warriors (*samurai*). The lord's power was based solely on his own military strength, for there were no sources of security and prestige other than raw power. His position depended on the continuing loyalty of his samurai retainers, and thus he rewarded his leading vassals with fiefs, titles, and other preferential treatment.

The normal state of relations among these small feudal states was warfare. This was a period of great instability, and fluctuations in power and in amounts of territory controlled were continuous. If a lord failed to defend his territory he would either lose it to a more powerful neighboring lord or he would be overthrown by one of his own vassals.

Perhaps because betrayal and treachery were frequent, loyalty was the highest virtue. Yet no lord could wholly trust his vassals; they might try to overthrow him, or if they felt he was losing to a neighboring lord they might break away and join that lord. In these conditions of endemic warfare, lords were constantly suspicious of one another. It was not just that they were power mad, but rather, somewhat like nations in modern times, each one was afraid of his neighbor, fearful that if he himself did not expand, he would be conquered. The overriding concern of each lord, therefore, was to maximize his military power. This was a topsy-turvy age in which lords rose and fell not merely from one generation to another, but from one decade to another.

Power could scarcely have been further fragmented. Gradually, however, stabilizing forces began to appear. To overcome the conditions of upheaval and instability new institutions were created in the late 1500s, culminating in the establishment of the Tokugawa hegemony and the reunification of the country.

Consolidation of Local Power

The foundation for this great new unified order was laid in the second half of the sixteenth century with the consolidation of power at the local level. The primary reason for the new stability was the emergence, after a century of warfare, of feudal lords (*daimyo*) throughout the country who were able to impose greater control than their predecessors had over both their fighting men and the economic resources of the territory they controlled.

The local lord gained greater power vis-à-vis his samurai retainers by gradually diminishing the independent power bases that had existed within his domain. He learned that by obliging his vassals to reside close to him he could much more effectively control them. The lord achieved greater subordination of his warriors by organizing them more tightly into a methodical ranking. Similarly he was finding more systematic ways to assess the land tax on the peasantry in his domain.

As the process of consolidation of power at the local level went forward, a lord could associate himself with a more powerful lord in his region who would protect and guarantee his position. If then a lord's vassal rose against him, he could call on that powerful regional lord for help. In this way the daimyo formed regional groupings led by a particularly powerful lord; in turn, the power of each daimyo vis-à-vis his own vassals was enhanced by his belonging to such a grouping.

Castle Towns

This consolidation of power at the local level and the increased strength of the daimyo was dramatically symbolized by the massive castles they built in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In a relatively short space of time (especially in the period from 1580 to 1610) castles sprang up across the Japanese countryside. In all parts of the country the newly emergent daimyo, who numbered in excess of 200, built great stone fortresses at the heart of their domains, where they could assemble their samurai retainers and effectively dominate the strategic and productive resources of the surrounding countryside.

These central citadels with towers soaring above the landscape symbolized the new ascendancy of the daimyo at the local level. To

build the great structures they had to be able to mobilize large amounts of labor and to assemble highly skilled craftsmen. Previously, during the Warring States Period, fortifications had been of much smaller proportions and were ordinarily located on mountain tops, but in the new, more stable conditions castles were built in the lowlands and plains. Here, in and about the confines of the citadel, the lord settled his vassals and retainers.

As the warriors moved from the countryside into the castles, merchants and artisans and shrines and temples followed quickly to service the warriors' needs. Across Japan new "castle towns" came into being. Prior to 1550 nearly everyone had lived in farming or fishing villages. There were only two or three population centers that could accurately be called cities. One was Kyoto, the capital, which had about a quarter of a million inhabitants. Another was the nearby port of Sakai, the beneficiary of a flourishing overseas trade; it numbered perhaps 50,000 inhabitants. There were probably no more than a half dozen other towns with as many as 20,000. Edo (present-day Tokyo) was still a fishing village.

Then with dramatic suddenness in the years after 1550, new cities began to spring up as a result of the increasing stability at the local level, the building of castles, and the withdrawal of samurai from the countryside. A period of extraordinary urban growth ensued. John W. Hall has written, "Most of the first-ranking castles and castle towns such as Himeji, Osaka, Kanagawa, Wakayama, Tokushima, Kōchi, Takamatsu, Hiroshima, Edo, Wakamatsu, Okayama, Kōfu, Fushimi, Takasaki, Sendai, Fukuoka, Fukui, Kumamoto, Tottori, Matsuyama, Hikone, Fukushima, Yonezawa, Shizuoka, and Nagoya were founded during the brief span of years between 1580 and 1610. It would be hard to find a parallel period of urban construction in world history."⁴ The castle towns became important urban centers in the various regions of Japan and remain so today. Edo grew into the modern metropolis of Tokyo. Two-thirds of the present prefectural capitals were once castle towns.

The building of those castle towns and the events associated with it, particularly the removal of most samurai from the countryside into the city, constitute one of the most important developments in the history of Japan. We may sum up their long-range significance as follows.

1. The result of most immediate historical significance was that these fortresses and the control that they exercised over the local countryside further helped stabilize the local areas and provided the building blocks, the firm base upon which national unification could rest. With the samurai settled closely about the castle keep, the daimyo could the more easily control them and hence overcome the topsyturvy nature of local politics that had prevailed during the preceding Warring States Period.

2. The gradual withdrawal of the samurai from the countryside set in motion a fundamental change in the nature of the warrior ruling class that had immense long-range significance for Japan. Previously samurai had been scattered over the land in villages, living on fiefs granted them by their lord, where they had been responsible for levying taxes, administering local justice, and keeping the peace. Now, however, living in a castle town, the warrior's ties with the land were soon cut. Instead of being rewarded with a fief from his lord, he was paid a stipend. Gradually, over the course of generations, the warriors ceased to be a landed elite. Instead they became more akin to bureaucrats, for the lord as he became absolute in his domain used his retainers as officials and clerks. Living in the castle town, with their juridical and social ties to the land gone, the warriors staffed the daimyo's bureaucracy. Thomas C. Smith sums up the profound transformation that was taking place:

The lord, having taken in his hands his vassals' political and judicial functions, now governed an average population of about 100,000. To police so large a population, to collect its taxes and regulate its trade, to give it justice and maintain its roads and irrigation works, required a small army of officials and clerks. The lord, of course, used his vassals to perform these functions, to man the expanding and differentiating bureaucracy under him. The warriors who manned the bureaucracy exercised far more power over the rest of the population than warriors ever had before; but it was a new kind of power. Formerly power was personal and territorial; it pertained to a piece of land and belonged to a man as inherited right. Now it was impersonal and bureaucratic: it pertained to a specialized office to which one must be appointed and from which he might be removed.⁵

As the warrior's legal relationship to the land changed, as he became more akin to a bureaucratic officeholder, he came to lack private economic or political power. This fact had great historical significance. The gradual transformation of the feudal ruling class into a landless bureaucratic elite helps to explain the remarkable responsiveness of Japan in the nineteenth century. When faced with the challenge of undertaking the great political and economic changes required by the industrial revolution, Japan responded quickly, in part because it had no politically powerful landed class, no entrenched land-based gentry such as existed in China, which would bitterly resist those changes. We shall explore this factor later. Here it is sufficient to point out that the movement of samurai from the countryside to the castle town in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries radically changed the nature

of the ruling class, in a way that was to ease economic and political change in the nineteenth century.

3. Another consequence associated with the appearance of castle towns and the consolidation of local power was the development of local administrative practice. As the Warring States Period gave way to peaceful stability in the seventeenth century, the castle towns became concerned less with military matters than with problems of local administration. As Hall has summed up: "The great castles of Japan came to house the central and local administrative headquarters of the nation. From them political authority radiated outward into the countryside. . . . Life in Tokugawa Japan became infinitely more regularized and subject to written law than under earlier feudal regimes, and this in turn was a step in the direction of more modern public administration."⁶

4. The growth of the castle towns helped bring into being a large and vital merchant class during the Tokugawa Period (1600–1868). As samurai gradually settled around the castle, a merchant class to service them sprang up. The emerging castle town became the economic center of its domain. As time went on, the merchants took on greater importance and the samurai depended on them to fulfill vital economic functions. One contemporary Confucianist, lamenting the growing power of the merchants, wrote that the samurai in towns lived "as if in an inn"—dependent on the services of the merchants.

5. Along with the rise of the mercantile class, the Tokugawa Period saw a gradual growth of a market economy and of specialization and commercialization in agriculture. In place of the old self-sufficient pattern, farming tended to become far more specialized as produce was sold in the local market. The peasants more and more grew the special crops for which their climate and land were best suited. What they did not themselves produce, they could buy. One must be careful not to exaggerate the suddenness of this development: it took place gradually over a long period of time and at a different pace in various parts of the country.

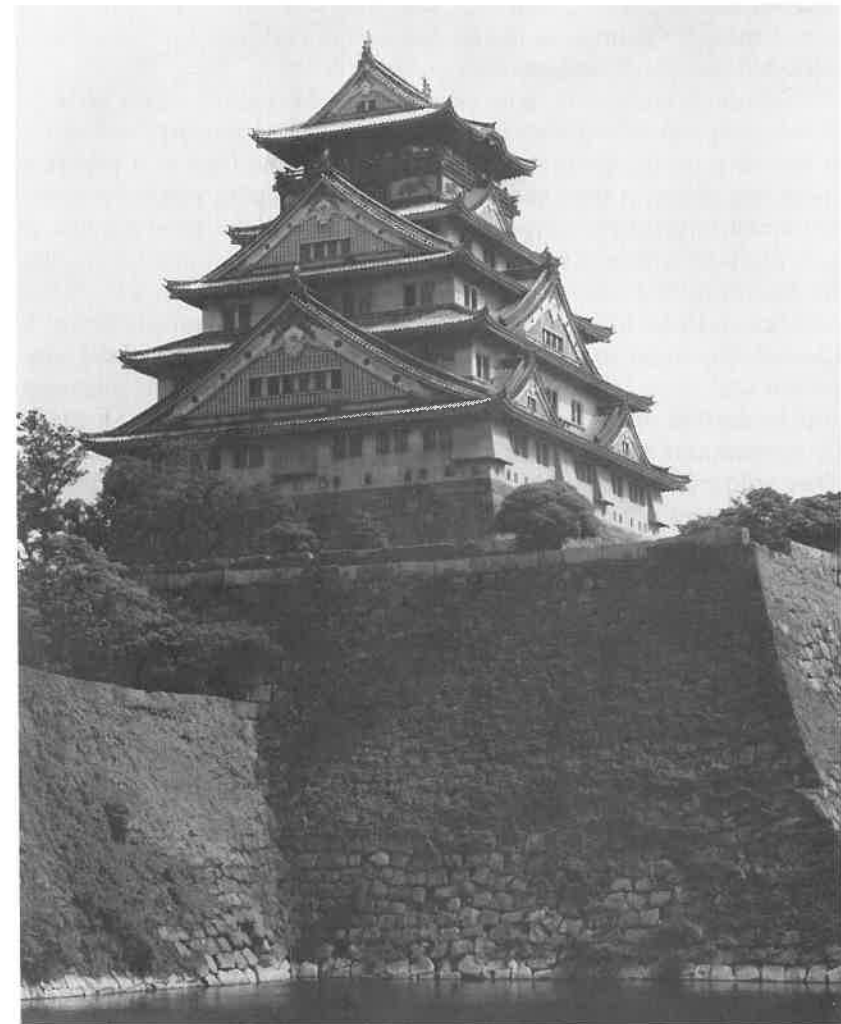
6. The growth of castle towns contributed to the improvement of transportation. Roads to and from the castle towns became essential for economic, administrative, and strategic functions.

7. Castle towns contributed to development of an urban culture. The brightest and gaudiest culture existed in Edo and Osaka, but even the smaller castle towns were infected by the tastes and life-style of the townsmen.

In tracing the long-range significance of the castle towns, we have gotten far ahead of our story, for these results unfolded gradually over the course of the Tokugawa Period and were by no means evident in the late sixteenth century when castle towns came into being. We shall pursue each one of these consequences in detail in the succeeding pages.

Toward Unification

The stabilization of power at the local level made available the firm base upon which first regional and then national unity could be built. Gradually daimyo at the regional level joined together, the lesser daimyo pledging loyalty to or being conquered by the strongest daimyo in the region. In warfare that occupied the years from 1570 to 1600 these regional groupings contended with one another for national hegemony. It was three successive daimyo from central Hon-



Osaka castle, built in 1583 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. *National Archives*

shu, Japan's largest island, who assembled a powerful coalition of forces, one by one gained the submission of other regional clusters of daimyo, and ultimately succeeded in unifying Japan.

These three lords were Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), his chief vassal Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616). What enabled these three extraordinary men to bring about a new centralization of power? Partly their success was due to their strategic location in central Honshu, where they could control the greatest food-producing plains in Japan and where they had easy access to Kyoto, the capital and traditional symbol of legitimacy for national political power. Partly it was the result of brilliant military strategy. No less important, however, was their demonstrated mastery of two of the main sources of feudal power that had to be controlled and exploited: land and peasants.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who succeeded to leadership of the reunification campaign after Oda's death in 1582, was particularly successful in devising measures to strengthen control of the land and peasants under his sway. In the 1580s he ordered a sweeping resurvey of the cultivated land in the countryside to determine the productivity of each piece of land and identify the individual responsible for paying the tax on it. Not only did the land survey tighten collection of the land tax and provide a solid new basis for village organization, but it allowed Toyotomi to assign to his vassal daimyo lands he had conquered with firm knowledge of the value of those lands. At the same time he carried out his so-called sword hunt by an edict that forbade all nonsamurai to keep "swords, sidearms, daggers, spears or any other military equipment." Thus a sharp line of distinction was drawn between the sword-carrying warrior elite and the disarmed commoners. Other edicts sought to freeze society by tying peasants to their villages and occupation. Similarly, samurai were not to return to the villages, nor were they to change masters. Toyotomi's purpose was to eliminate both physical and occupational mobility and to stabilize the social order.

These reforms, occurring as the castle towns were being built throughout Japan, served to enhance the trend toward consolidation of the daimyo's power. The meticulous land survey made it easier to withdraw samurai from the countryside and supervise the tax collection from the castle. The other reforms, which disarmed the commoners and tied them to their occupation and village, made local society more tractable to daimyo rule. Thus, as the coalition of daimyo led by Toyotomi gradually brought the country under its authority, reforms were instituted that strengthened the daimyo vis-à-vis their retainers and that diminished the possibility of disruption at the local level. The basis was laid for the remarkable national social and political order that would endure more than two and a half centuries.

Notes

1. Quoted in C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 29.
2. Alessandro Valignano, quoted in Michael Cooper, *They Came to Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 229.
3. Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), ch. 2.
4. John Whitney Hall, "The Castle Town and Japan's Modern Urbanization," in *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan*, ed. John Whitney Hall and Marius B. Jansen (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), 176.
5. Thomas C. Smith, *Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, 1750–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 138.
6. Hall, "Castle Town," 179, 183.