Minamoto no Yoritomo

For the column ‘History: Japanese Destinies’



Figure 1: Portrait of Yoritomo, by Fujiwara Takanobu

Minamoto no Yoritomo was born in 1147 in Owari Province, in Kansai. He was the third son of Minamoto no Yoshitomo, leader of the Minamoto clan[1]. In 1160, his father led a coup against the Kyoto authorities, supporting Fujiwara no Nobuyori, a close adviser to the emperor, against his rival Fujiwara no Michinori, also influential at the imperial court. His attempt failed when Taira no Kiyomori, with the approval of Emperor Nijō and retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa, returned to Kyoto and defeated the Minamoto forces. This crushing failure led to Yoshitomo's execution along with his eldest sons, while Yoritomo was sent to eastern Japan to be raised within a minor branch of the Taira clan. For several decades, the Minamoto name carried little weight in the affairs of an imperial court shaped by Kiyomori's rise to power.

When Prince Mochihito rebelled in 1180 against the rise of the Taira, who sought to exclude him from the throne, Yoritomo's support surprised the Taira government more than it worried it. Despite his limited standing, Yoritomo distinguished himself through political acumen, skilfully exploiting growing resentment towards imperial power outside Kyoto, caused by excessive centralisation around the capital combined with Kiyomori's authoritarian exercise of power.

Shortly after a crushing defeat at Sagami in August that year, he won his first major victory over the Taira at the Battle of Fujigawa. During this period, Yoritomo made the ambitious decision to establish his own government in Kamakura. With his allies, he continued his campaign against Kyoto, but also, and above all, against dissident elements within his own camp. In 1185, his brother Minamoto no Yoshitsune sealed the Taira's fate at the Battle of Dan-no-ura, shortly after the rest of the Minamoto army captured Kyoto. Yet Yoritomo distinguished himself not solely through military prowess against a Taira clan weakened on every side, but through political determination and the profound changes he brought to existing structures. That same year, he demanded that Kyoto grant him the power to appoint jitō (a kind of local military governor) on behalf of the authority he represented in Kamakura. Although seemingly unremarkable at first glance, this was an initial formalisation of a system of vassalage under a power outside the court, centred on a military leader based far from Kansai. It was a crucial step in forming the Kamakura shogunate, Japan's first shogunate[2], marking the country's entry into its feudal period. Yoritomo then spent several years stabilising the country and suppressing insurgents hostile to central authority who used the Minamoto name to develop local influence, often with the assent of the imperial court, which he never confronted directly.

Finally, after several unsuccessful attempts to enter the imperial family, Yoritomo retired permanently to Kamakura in 1196, accompanied by a marked decline in communications between Kyoto and Kamakura. He died there in 1199, having opened a new era for Japan, marked by

[1] The Minamoto clan was far from a united, indivisible entity. Internal struggles were frequent, and those claiming Minamoto descent occupied widely varying ranks in Japanese society, from descendants of Kyoto nobility to ordinary members of provincial governments.

[2] This refers to the first shogunate, not the first shogun. The title of shogun had been conferred several times long before Yoritomo, who in fact placed relatively little value on it.

an initial break with the form of government the country had previously known. It would nevertheless take until the Ashikaga shogunate in the early 14th century for this break to be fully realised and the last political vestiges of the Heian era finally to disappear.

1 References

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