

2011

Causes of piracy in medieval Japan

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Causes of piracy in medieval Japan

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine why there were phases of intense international raiding by Japanese pirates during Japan's medieval period. The scope of the study spans two distinct phases of piratical activity by Japanese marauders known as the wako, the first lasting from 1223 to 1265 and the second from 1350 to the early 1400s. As the wako have been studied before from the perspective of the central governments of the period affected by the raiding, namely those of Japan, China, and Korea, this is an examination of the causes of piracy from the perspective of those on the periphery of Japanese society.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

History and Philosophy

First Advisor

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CAUSES OF PIRACY IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in History

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April 11, 2011

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5

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine why there were phases of intense international raiding by Japanese pirates during Japan's medieval period. The scope of the study spans two distinct phases of piratical activity by Japanese marauders known as the wakō, the first lasting from 1223 to 1265 and the second from 1350 to the early 1400s. As the wakō have been studied before from the perspective of the central governments of the period affected by the raiding, namely those of Japan, China, and Korea, this is an examination of the causes of piracy from the perspective of those on the periphery of Japanese society.

I argue that the first phase of wakō activity commenced largely as a response to the desperation felt by those living in the Kyushu region of Japan. This desperation was caused by severe natural disasters, increased taxation by corrupt officials, and a generally heightened level of violence following the brief period of civil war preceding the raids. I also investigate the effects external factors such as extra-legal trade and foreign relations had in creating an environment conducive to raiding. The role of the Mongol invasions of Japan at the end of the thirteenth century as a break between the two phases of wakō activity is also given considerable attention.

I then examine the second phase of Japanese piracy and explain the shift in factors that caused this phase to be so much more devastating than the first. Particular attention is given to profit rather than desperation as a motivating factor for the pirates, the civil war raging throughout Japan at the time, the militarily weakened state of the Korean peninsula, and the resumption of international relations between Japan and its neighbors. Finally, I will examine the strategies of Ming China and the Choson Court in Korea to suppress these Japanese raiders and why the Korean model was ultimately successful in bringing nearly two hundred years of Japanese piracy abroad to a close.

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Piracy as both a crime and a way of life has existed around the world in various forms almost as long as ships have been used for transporting goods. While westerners are most familiar with the buccaneers of the late seventeenth century's so-called "Golden Age of Piracy," East Asia had by that time already experienced its own wave of marauding. Beginning in the 1220s and extending well into the sixteenth century, Japanese pirates known as the *wakō* meaning "Japanese raiders" (倭寇 Chinese: *wokou*, Korean: *waegu*) ravaged the coastal areas of Southeast Asia in search of grain, slaves, and other valuables. Through their raids, the *wakō* achieved a status of infamy bordering on myth among their victims, who assigned them supernatural skills in water and used the mere mention of them as a curse, and with good reason. The destruction of villages, the taking of slaves, and the disruption *wakō* thievery caused in the Korean peninsula and coastal China played a significant role in defining domestic policies, foreign relations, and the rise and fall of dynasties. The influence the *wakō* had on East Asian history is undeniable, but what caused the rise of these marauders? Why was there a three-hundred-year-long period of intense international raiding by Japanese pirates during Japan's medieval period?

While western scholars have long acknowledged and analyzed the effects of the *wakō* invasions, the question of *why* this spike in piracy occurred has been seriously neglected. These waves of piratical activity are almost always studied in the west from the perspective of the center, with the emphasis being the considerable effect the *wakō* had on international relations and trade in East Asia. The most extensive work on the *wakō* in English, Benjamin Harrison Hazard's *Japanese Marauding in Medieval Korea: The Wakō Impact on Late Koryō*, is, as the title suggests, told from such a perspective.

Hazard outlines some of the factors that caused the Japanese to raid, obstacles Korea's Koryo dynasty faced in combating Japanese piracy (mainly military incompetence and multiple foreign threats), and ways in which the wakō contributed to their ultimate downfall. Additionally, since much of the information is drawn from court chronicles, it supplies detailed information on the characteristics of wakō raids during the mid-late 1300s. Another helpful source for information on the wakō focuses on not the effects and characteristics of Japanese marauding, but its suppression. Kenneth R. Robinson's *From Raiders to Traders: Border Security and Border Control in Early Choson, 1392-1450* relates how the Choson court that replaced the Koryo court of Hazard's study ultimately removed the threat of foreign piracy through a combination of military actions and incorporation of pirate leaders into the Choson trade and government structure. Through studying how Japanese piracy was ultimately suppressed in Korea, we can gain insight into the motives for raiding in the first place.

Any work on Japan's medieval international relations would be remiss without at least a brief mention of the pirates, and therefore much of the information to be found on the wakō in English is in small sections of studies on trade, foreign relations, border control, slavery, etc. that mention the impact the wakō had in these areas. Some examples are Tanaka Takeo's *Japan's Relations with Overseas Countries*, which mentions the pirates briefly in the context of their impact on relations with Korea, and in *Slavery in Medieval Japan*, Thomas Nelson explains that the taking of slaves was a common practice of the wakō and the role these slaves would later play in maintaining and establishing trade contacts between Japan, Korea, and the Ryukyu islands. The wakō are given greater attention in Charlotte VonVerschuer's book *Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea From the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries*, and

in her translations and analysis of the medieval Zen priest Zuikai Shuho's chronicles of Japan's foreign relations. These two publications in particular are invaluable for understanding the extent of the wakō's influence on trade and foreign relations, mentioning not only how these raids were viewed by the Japanese and Chinese governments and their responses to them, but then how the Japanese response was judged by the Ming dynasty.

These studies give a view of the wakō almost exclusively from the perspective of the center, those who held the power in Japan and other East Asian nations, and controlled such functions as international relations and regional authority. Through such publications, we get a clear idea of the significant impact the wakō had on various functions of central government. What appears to be missing from western scholarship however, are studies that examine the opposite. While there are detailed studies in English on the impact changes in these areas of central authority had on the lower classes of Japanese society, there has not been an attempt to then tie this impact to piracy. The decision of the raiders to venture abroad is not an inexplicable anomaly. The rise of the wakō was an effect of the socio-economic changes experienced by those on the periphery of Japanese society as a result of the significant changes in Japan's government that characterized the medieval period. What changes occurred in international relations and regional authority during the first two phases of wakō activity and what was their impact on the marauders? What other factors can we consider to explain why people turned to piracy? This study is an attempt to fill in these gaps in information on the wakō pirates and answer the central question of why there were periods of intense international raiding by Japanese pirates from the 1200s to the early 1400s.

These phases of wakō activity occurred due to a shifting combination of factors,

the most significant of which being the desperation faced by those living on the periphery of Japanese society and the desire for profit. These factors were exacerbated by internal conditions in Japan and its neighbors, namely China and Korea, and by relations between the three nations. This study begins by analyzing internal conditions in Japan in the years leading up to and during the beginning of wakō activity in the 1200s. Here, I will examine how a series of severe natural disasters occurring alongside a period of significant political upheaval created a climate in which high levels of violence and corruption pushed those already struggling to survive to turn to become wakō. Additionally, alternatives to piracy in this period will also be considered.

There was a brief respite in wakō raiding from the late 1200s to the mid 1300s. While high fatality rates among the first generation of wakō were a factor in the cessation of raiding after 1265, the significant impact the Mongol invasions of the late 1200s had on temporarily stalling wakō activity will also be examined, as will their contribution to the downfall of Japan's first military government. Its collapse, the rise of a new military government and the civil war that accompanied it led to a recommencement of wakō activity in 1350. This second phase of raiding lasted over twice as long as the first and occurred on a much larger scale. I will argue that it was a combination of many factors on both the regional, national and international level account for this new level of wakō activity. Particular attention will be given to the effects of a shift in power from central to regional authority, Japan's renewal of international correspondence with the courts in China and Korea, and the change in the primary motivation of the wakō from survival to profit. Finally, I will analyze the suppression of wakō activity in the early 1400s and why the strategy of Korea's Choson court was so effective in bringing an end to the second phase of Japanese piracy. But first, let us begin with an examination of these phases of

wakō activity and the region from which they came.

I. Time and Place

As there is still considerable debate over how to neatly (if arbitrarily) divide Japanese history into several eras, a study of piracy in medieval Japan must first begin with which years constitute “medieval” Japan. For the purposes of analyzing the wakō, I follow the timeline described in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, which discusses medieval Japan as spanning the centuries between 1185, when Japan's first military government was established, and the civil wars of the mid sixteenth century, which ushered in Japan's early modern period.¹ This period was characterized by a system of dual rule in which authority was shared between the imperial court and military governments. This will be discussed further in the section on the establishment of military rule. Another characteristic, often compared to feudal Europe, is the concentration of effective authority in local and regional powers rather than the central government. Japan's medieval period was also marked by its own series of civil wars. All of these would have an impact on the piracy that lasted nearly throughout the extent of this period. Conversely, piracy was then itself a driving force for change in Japan's central government.

Altogether, the wakō raids spanned over 300 years, from the early 1200s to the mid 1500s. Throughout this age of piratical activity, there were shifts in the scope and

style of raids, the risks and rewards involved changed, and even the ethnicity of the “Japanese” pirates became more and more questionable.² When the marauding began in 1223, bands of Japanese occasionally ventured out in one or two ships to raid Korean coastal villages. By the end of the fourteenth century, the wakō had expanded to massive fleets and conducted raids penetrating deep into the Korean peninsula and along the Southern Chinese coast. Then, by the mid sixteenth century the “Japanese raiders” were in fact primarily Chinese commissioned by powerful Chinese merchant families and the plundering occurred almost exclusively there rather than the Korean peninsula. Because of these differences, scholars divide these three centuries of wakō activity into either two or three distinct phases. One method recognizes the period from 1223 to the early 1400s as the first phase of Japanese piracy and the marauding of the sixteenth century as the second. For those subscribing to this interpretation, the raids of the thirteenth century are considered merely a precursor to those of the fourteenth.

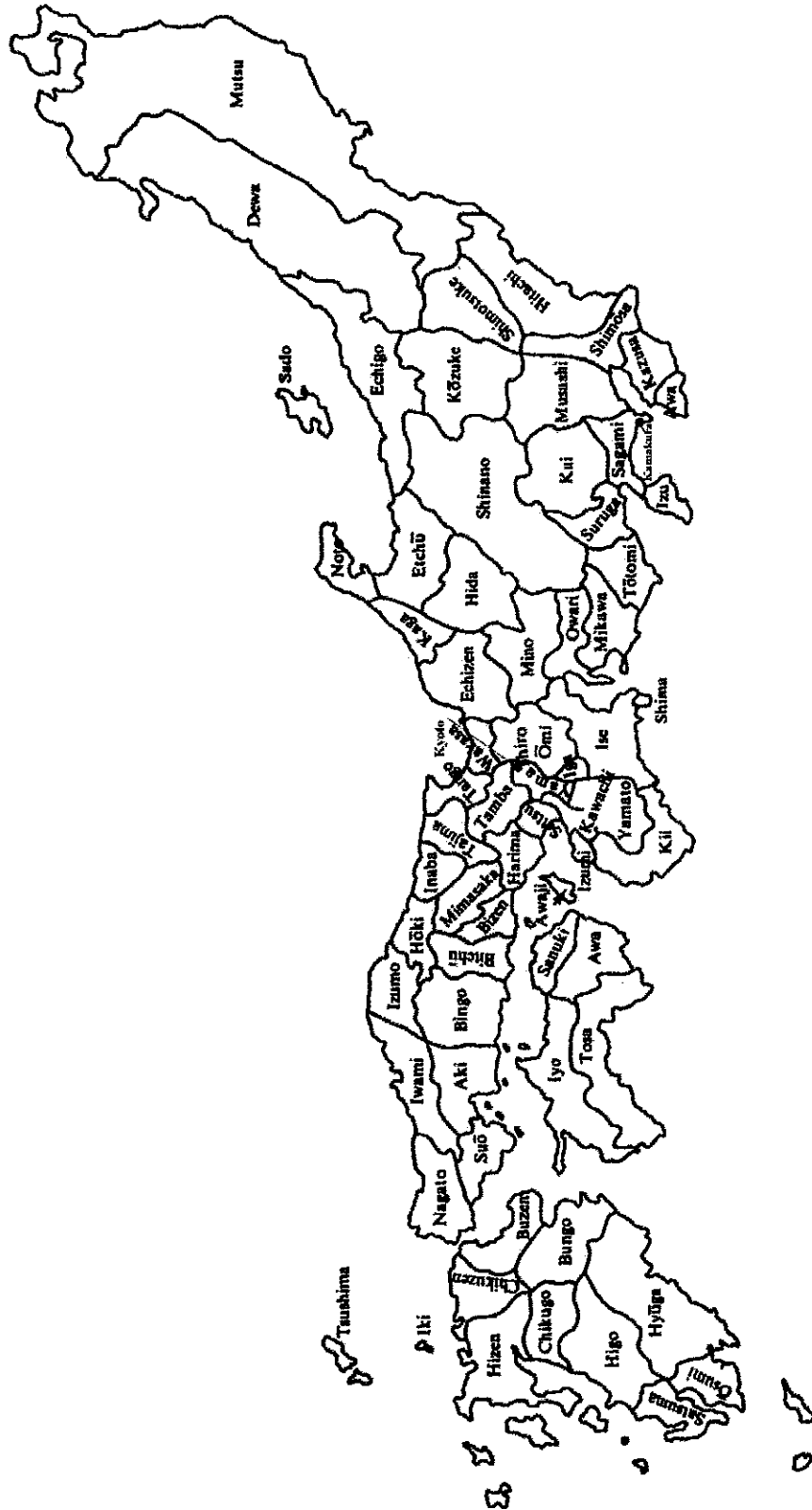
However, a more accurate interpretation describes three periods of activity, with the raids of the 1200s a phase distinct from those of the following century. This method of division acknowledges that while the wakō of the second phase no doubt benefited from the experience of their predecessors, differences between the first two phases in motive, scale, and method as well as the fact that there was a seventy year period between raids argues for their consideration as two separate phases. Furthermore, the categorizing of the raids of the sixteenth century as a third phase of “Japanese” marauding is potentially misleading. Multiple scholars have acknowledged that while Japanese did participate in the piracy that plagued China in the sixteenth century, so did many others including Europeans, Koreans, and other East-Asians, and the primary actors were in fact Chinese. Therefore, from the perspective of looking without from Japan, it can be

accurately described as another phase for Japanese piracy. However, when one broadens their perspective, it is in fact a period of international piracy in the waters of East Asia. Taking these points into consideration, this study is focused on only the first two phases of Japanese piracy.³

The wakō pirates of both the mid 1200s and mid to late 1350s stemmed mainly from the provinces of Northern Kyūshū, particularly the Mutsu peninsula in Hizen province (composed partly of present day Nagasaki Prefecture.) The population of these regions, as we will see, tended to be of an “unruly” sort, and would be more disposed to a marauding lifestyle than the rest of Japan. Kyūshū is the southernmost of the four main islands that make up modern Japan, and by far the closest to the Korean peninsula, thus the temptation to raid was strengthened by the ease of access their geographical proximity offered. During the second phase of raiding, it took only one day and one night to reach it by ship.⁴ Additionally, monsoon winds in the summer months further simplified voyages to the continent.⁵ Another wakō stronghold even closer to their target was Tsushima Island, located between Japan and the Korean peninsula, though slightly closer to the latter. This made it a simple matter to conduct raids between the two with even a small vessel, and ships sailing from mainland Kyūshū would often use the island as a midway point to stop and gather information.

Unlike modern states in which borders are either rigidly defined and defended or a point of intense international dispute, the borders between Korea and Japan were not strictly defined by central authorities for much of the medieval period.⁶ This is not to say that there was no sense of national boundaries whatsoever. Rather, regional officials such as provincial governors, or even powerful local families functioned as what Batten refers to as “boundary powers”.⁷ These powers both administered within their own territory and

The Provinces of Medieval Japan⁸



exercised their influence in the zones around them in areas such as trade, shipbuilding, and fishing, meaning there was a significant degree of contact in these areas. Japanese fishermen plying the waters near the peninsula would have been aware of the locations of coastal cities and the state of their defenses, knowledge they could either use personally or pass on to the wakō. Other sources of contact between the people of Tsushima and the peninsula, particularly trade, could also be exploited for purposes of gathering information and forming strategies. For its part, the state of Koryo, which lasted on the Korean peninsula until 1392, had its own means of gathering information on internal conditions in Japan. For instance, once officials in Koryo realized that wakō raids were normally preceded by times of famine, they were able to fortify themselves in advance against marauders when they heard of disasters in Japan, as they did following a food shortage in Japan in 1251.⁹ The regions' geographical proximity also meant that if Korea was experiencing drought or famine, Kyūshū was most likely also affected, and Koryo could prepare its ports for raids accordingly.

The Kyūshū region's proximity to the continent also conversely reveals its great distance from the center of power in Kamakura (near present day Tokyo). Neither the Kamakura *bakufu* (military government) during the first phase of raiding, nor the Muromachi in the second had a strong influence in Kyūshū. Prior to the Kamakura period, it was the Taira clan, the enemies of the bakufu's founders (the Minamoto clan), who controlled the Kyūshū region as well as much of the coast along the inland sea.¹⁰ Thus, it took time for the Minamoto, who rose up from the East, to establish any sort of real influence in the West following their victory. In the case of the Ashikaga (the founders of the Muromachi bakufu), the first sixty years of their reign was marred by a period of civil war that occurred nearly throughout the second phase of raiding. It was the

enemies of the bakufu in this war that wielded much of the effective power in Kyūshū.

These geographical factors were compounded by the gradual shift of power from central to regional authorities in the medieval period. The result was that both the Kamakura and Muromachi bakufu faced a difficult challenge when it came to suppressing the wakō because they had already surrendered the authoritative power in the region to local officials, many of whom were involved in piracy themselves. In the case of the Kamakura military government during the first phase of piracy, geographical distance and issues with regional authority were only half of the issue when it came to countering pirates sailing from Japanese shores. As the idea of a military government in addition to the existing court was new, the balance of power between court and bakufu was not yet firmly established when the wakō attacks began. Such factors would have strong implications for the bakufu's response to Japanese marauding.

II. The Founding of the Kamakura Bakufu and the Jōkyū War (1185-1221)

Dramatic changes in Japan's government in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century contributed to the commencement of wakō activity in several ways. First, the rise of the warrior class throughout the twelfth century culminated in a bloody civil war and the establishment of a second government alongside the existing court-administered bureaucracy, a military government known now as the Kamakura Bakufu. The bakufu gradually came to dominate central authority, resulting in a backlash led by court figureheads over three decades later. Though none of the fighting occurred in Kyūshū,

the brief Jōkyū War that resulted directly affected the lives of those inhabiting the region. Defeated warriors traveled west where bakufu power was not as established, violent roving bands terrorized the countryside and corrupt officials demanded increased taxes from the already struggling peasantry. In other words, political upheaval and wars that accompanied it helped create an environment in Northern Kyūshū in which piracy was to be expected.

The Gempei War and the Beginning of Dual Rule

One of the characteristics of Japan's late Heian period (794-1185) that preceded the establishment of Japan's first military government was the rise of the warrior class, exemplified by Taira no Kiyomori, head of the powerful Taira clan. Incidentally, Kiyomori's original acclaim as a military leader came from his suppression of piracy on the inland sea during his tenure as governor of Aki province. Kiyomori's success and status allowed him to join court society in Kyoto under the patronage of the retired emperor and climb as high as the rank of prime minister within the court hierarchy. Ostensibly to protect the integrity of the imperial family from the incursions of the Taira, their eastern-based rivals, the Minamoto, as well as several other powerful families launched a bloody civil war against them. Known as the Gempei war, it ended in 1185 with the victory of the Minamoto, who managed to gain the loyalty of much of the warrior class by promising guarantees of land rights through an administrative system outside of the court bureaucracy.¹¹ Such a system was extremely attractive to the warrior class, particularly powerful local warriors who had been shut out of top provincial and estate appointments in favor of the nobility. Established in 1185, the Kamakura bakufu began a new system of dual rule in Japan in which power and administrative authority

was divided between the court in Kyoto and the bakufu in Kamakura.

The bakufu in its early years functioned almost entirely as a judicial authority over complaints against and by its own vassals,¹² with the court still responsible for most administrative roles, though this would change as the bakufu became increasingly involved in international correspondence engendered by the wakō attacks as well as in domestic issues such as imperial succession. This dual rule was not just on the level of central authority, but was also apparent in the Kyūshū provinces. The *shōen* private agricultural estates still existed, comprising over 70 percent of the agricultural land in some provinces.¹³ These estates were generally owned and inherited by absentee proprietors living at or near the court in Kyoto, which imposed annual taxes of rice, wood, or manufactured goods on each estate as well as dues such as military service or construction. The *shōen* were divided into smaller holdings, each administered by a different holder (typically a wealthy peasant) who was responsible for collecting taxes and organizing the labor dues allotted to their holding by the proprietor.¹⁴ The bakufu integrated themselves forcefully into this structure through the creation of the *jitō*, or land steward position on *shōen* owned by temples and noblemen, though a minority were assigned to bakufu-administered lands.¹⁵ The *jitō* had various duties to perform in the *shōen*, the most important of which was the collection of tax payments, a function that was abused by many *jitō*, who did not answer to the owners of the estates, but only to the bakufu itself. As the military administrative structure gradually came to dominate over the court, these abuses became more common and were a source of constant complaints to the Kamakura bakufu.

On the regional level, court-appointed governors still handled much of the administration of the provinces in the early years of the bakufu.¹⁶ Kamakura's counterpart

to the imperial governors was the *shugo*. The shugo had three main duties: the management of the bakufu's housemen in their region, particularly in times of war, keeping peace in their areas by putting down rebellions and serious crime, and investigating cases regarding the bakufu's interests in the provinces. The bakufu used these positions to simultaneously reward and control their vassals, a system that operated well in times of civil war when new land could be confiscated from the bakufu's enemies, and thus new positions became open for appointment as was the case with the Jōkyū War that began in 1221.

The Jōkyū War and Its Effects

Effective power just before the start of the Jōkyū War did not rest with the emperor nor with the head of the bakufu, the *shogun*, however, but with the retired emperor Gotoba and the shogun's powerful regent, Hōjō Yoshitoki. Concerned over the growing power of the military government and the economic wealth flowing into the pockets of the warriors rather than the nobility, and wishing to re-centralize effective power with himself in Kyoto, Gotoba launched his plans to bring down the bakufu by military force in 1221 by declaring key members in rebellion against the imperial court.¹⁷ He even recruited some of the bakufu's own vassals into his army by reassuring them he was simply trying to limit bakufu authority, not destroy it. This duplicity was also concealed by the fact that Gotoba declared the regent Yoshitoki rebel rather than the shogun.¹⁸ While a bloody conflict, Gotoba's army proved to be no match for the bakufu's military might. The retired emperor's forces were swiftly crushed and Gotoba exiled in a matter of one month.

The bakufu could have potentially destroyed the imperial system after their defeat

of the retired emperor's forces, assuming complete control over the Japanese state, but the Hōjō family chose rather to retain the imperial laws and Kyoto nobility to serve as a check on warriors who could grow to usurp the power of the Hōjō.¹⁹ Medieval scholar Jeffrey P. Mass sums up the immediate problems facing the Bakufu in the provinces following the war in this manner:

A reign of terror... now gripped the countryside. Both vassals and non-vassals interpreted the court's defeat as a license to engage in lawlessness. So savage was this outburst that whatever Kamakura's instinct for revenge against Kyoto, its leadership realized that the traditional authority system could not, without risk to the bakufu, be dismantled.²⁰

Another scholar goes even further, saying the Kyūshū region had “a tendency toward total anarchy.”²¹ This statement is illustrative of the recurrent disorder that plagued western Japan in the form of pirates and endemic violence, and it is true that, occupied as it was with such issues in the provinces as well as trying to develop an effective balance between the two power centers, the bakufu could hardly be expected to devote sufficient attention and resources to the problem of piracy stemming from its shores in this period. However the idea of “total anarchy” is a gross exaggeration. There was not a complete absence of authority by any means. A more accurate view is that effective authority, though often abused, was still exercised on various levels by local warriors and powerful families even though the central authorities did not make their presence felt in the distant Kyūshū region. Such changes in regional power because of the Jōkyū War and the disorder they caused in Kyūshū played key roles in the beginning of the first phase of wakō activity just two years later.

The need for Kamakura to punish Gotoba's retainers and the bakufu vassals who joined him as well as the need to reward their own warriors meant that a significant number of jitō positions changed hands following the war, particularly in the western

provinces and Kyūshū from where Gotoba had drawn most of his support. These new appointees, being sent from the center of power in the East as they were, were in unfamiliar territory in the west however, lacking the family ties and local influence their predecessors had possessed before the Jōkyū War. This meant that many also lacked the ability to administer as effectively in their new estates. Therefore, jitō abuse became commonplace. As the jitō were the tax collectors on agricultural estates, this could mean double or triple tax demands, theft of peasant's personal crops, forced labor to benefit the jitō, and even violence against the peasant population. In the first phase of piracy, this merely served to increase the desperation of those already facing the prospect of starvation and consequently forced some into piracy. Interestingly enough, the jitō could also clearly see the rewards of marauding and consequently many of the wakō in the first phase turned out to be Kamakura vassals.²²

Such criminal activity was not restricted entirely to the jitō however. Shugo were also known to take advantage of their position for personal gain, and powerful clans looked to profit from the disruption caused by famine and local power struggles by chartering their own raids. Such was the case with a 1232 raid ordered by the Kusano family as well as the piratical ventures of the Ouchi family during the second phase of wakō activity in the 1300s.²³ Of the Kyūshū officials that did not participate in piracy, and even among those that did, another criminal tendency was the formation of groups known as *akutō*.

Literally meaning “evil bands”, the *akutō* were armed groups of warriors, sometimes tightly controlled and highly organized, in other cases nothing more than loose, temporary confederations of thieves. The *akutō* terrorized villages all over Japan, including Kyūshū, but they were not seen in the region during the Kamakura period until

after the Jōkyū disturbance.²⁴ One reason the akutō appeared during this period was the aforementioned fact that the bakufu rewarded their warriors with land rights and positions on agricultural estates, ousting those who had fought against the bakufu in the Jōkyū War. In many cases these displaced officials used their contacts to call together local warriors and form an akutōband or turned to piracy. Even officials still in power, particularly those who did not have familial ties and alliances in the region, raised their own warrior bands to consolidate their hold. The core members of the akutō bands were almost always such local military officials, both ousted and those still with titles.²⁵ Through their positions, they were able to amass wealth and a significant amount of local power. There is no specific act that characterized every akutō band. They were known to murder, burn buildings, steal crops, commit robbery and any other act that could be designated an “evil deed”. This includes piracy, and it is fairly certain that some of the akutō bands during the second phase of piracy in the fourteenth century must have constituted a portion of the wakō bands.

Another theory attempting to explain the wave of piracy and akutō activity in Kyūshū is that the generations of Japanese at the beginning of these phases had a more aggressive and warlike mentality than their predecessors owing to the civil strife they had endured. As Benjamin Harrison Hazard expresses it: “The civil wars of the twelfth century had produced a ferment in which the old moral and social values were replaced by the new ones more in consonance with the new martial ruling class.”²⁶ In regards to the wakō of the 1350s, Arthur J. Marder asserted that “the warlike spirit stimulated by the Mongol campaigns and the incessant domestic turmoil made many Japanese bellicose and restless”.²⁷ Rather than a shift in the mentality of Japanese society as a whole however, I would argue that those who already possessed a more aggressive mentality

were drawn or pushed to Kyūshū for a variety of reasons. Kyūshū was both a popular point of exile for dissidents and a haven for the defeated warriors of the bakufu's enemies.

The Gempei War and the Jōkyū War contributed to such warlike elements in the population of Kyūshū. After the Taira were routed by the Minamoto in 1185, many may have drifted west to their old centers of power where the authority of the new military government was not yet established.²⁸ It is likely that the wakō ships sailing from Kyūshū forty years after the war may have carried some of the descendents of these defeated warriors. Furthermore, following the Jōkyū War, some of the remnants of retired emperor Gotoba's army fled west to Kyūshū and may have joined up with wakō bands that began their activity a mere two years later.²⁹ As important as the effects of the Jōkyū War were in contributing to the high level of violence and corruption in Kyūshū as well as to the weakening of central authority in the region, they pale in comparison to the series of natural disasters in Kyūshū as the main cause of the commencement of over three centuries of wakō activity.

III. The First Phase of Wakō Activity (1223-1265)

The main motivation for the first phase of raiding beginning in 1223 was desperation caused by a series of severe natural disasters. The marauders would set out in 1-2 ships every couple years in quest of grain and slaves, and often took advantage of Western Japan's extensive extra-legal trade contacts with Korea to gather information and

stage raids. The court in Korea attempted to complain to Japan's central authorities about the piracy, and while the bakufu denounced the actions of the pirates and made their subjugation the responsibility of the bakufu-appointed governors, there is only one recorded case of a bakufu official actually punishing a wakō band in this period. This shows just one of the ways in which issues in central and regional authority contributed to the problem of Japanese piracy. While the wakō were highly successful in pillaging Korean villages, the success came at the cost of extremely heavy casualties, often comprising half or nearly the entire band. By 1265, this, combined with the Mongol conquest of the peninsula in 1259 and their threats against Japan, helped lead to an end of the first phase of activity.

Natural Disasters

As stated before, in the period from 1223-1265, it appears that the main cause of wakō raids on the Korean peninsula was hunger. The arable land in northern Kyūshū and Tsushima is particularly sparse, and their inhabitants were already forced to augment their farming with fishing and other means just meet basic subsistence needs. These matters were made worse by a series of severe natural disasters in the early to mid 1200s. In one of his works on the wakō, Benjamin Hazard documents no less than seven epidemics, ten droughts (including three “Great droughts”), eight periods of famine and a typhoon in the years leading up to and during the initial phase of raiding.³⁰ In another work focusing specifically on this phase of piratical activity, he cites several examples in which specific disasters, such as a typhoon in Hizen province in the fall of 1226, may have directly led to raids in the following year because they did such damage to the rice crops, resulting in food shortages.³¹

Even more severe than these disasters was the worst famine in Japan's history, the Kangi Famine, lasting from 1229 to 1232 (so named for the era in which it occurred). The leading theory for the cause of the famine is an extended period of wet, cold weather caused by a spike in volcanic activity in East Asia or North America.³² Not did the famine claim the lives of countless Japanese throughout the country, it increased the desperation felt by Kyūshū inhabitants who already had little food and heavy taxes. According to reports he heard at the court in Kyoto, a nobleman described in his diary the entire region of Kyūshū as “destroyed” due to the effects of the famine.³³ The governor of Buzen (present day Western Fukuoka and Northern Oita prefectures) also claimed his province to be “empty” after so many died of starvation or abandoned their land in search of food in the more hospitable mountain regions.³⁴ Consequently, these are the years in which Japanese marauding of the Korean coast in the first phase was at it worst. The direct influence the famine had on the decision of those in Kyūshū to turn to raiding becomes even more apparent when one observes that following the end of the famine, there was a brief respite in raiding. The recommencement of raiding during this first phase after about two decades nearly coincides with the start of yet another severe famine dubbed the Shoga Famine which lasted from 1259-1267.³⁵ This famine's effects also extended onto the Korean continent. Instances of starving people resorting to cannibalism were reported in both countries, and disturbing accounts in noblemen's diaries of the sight and smell of dead bodies filling the streets are all too common.

These famines would have compounded the problem of piracy in several ways. First, hunger would have been the primary motivating factor. Secondly, the many lives lost to the famine also meant less labor available to work the land, meaning less rice to collect in taxes which put a strain on both peasant and tax collector. Many, including

bakufu officials, were either forced by circumstance or took advantage of the chaos surrounding the famine to abuse their position to demand higher taxes, turn to crimes such as raiding villages with akutō bands, or in the case of Kyūshū, piracy.³⁶ Because bakufu officials were also participating in such mischief, suppression of these activities became even more difficult.

The central authorities in both Kamakura and Kyoto attempted to ameliorate the effects of the famine by fixing prices to curb the out of control inflation of the price of rice, answering petitions for tax relief, and by opening grain stores to starving peasants. In 1260, the bakufu was forced to issue a mass pardon to any and all criminals because they could no longer feed the crowded jails the famine had resulted in. Were it not for the Mongol presence in Koryo and their impending invasions of Japan, this could likely have led to a swelling in the ranks of the wakō. Further effects of the invasions on Japanese piracy will be further discussed in a later section.

Characteristics of Wakō Raids during the First Phase

As mentioned before, the wakō came primarily from Northern Kyūshū, particularly the Mutsu peninsula of Hizen province and the islands of Iki and Tsushima. Much of the blame for the raiding in this period, at least for initiating them, is placed on the Mutsu Gangs, two groups comprised of between ten and twenty families formed for the purposes of protecting rights to fishing. The gangs would also figure prominently in the raids of the fourteenth century, their ranks swelled to ten times their size in the previous phase by defeated warriors following the fall of the Kamakura bakufu.³⁷ Not only were the Mutsu notorious for committing violent acts in the region, their fishing often took them to the Korean coast and Tsushima, giving multiple sources of

information through both their own observations of the peninsula and contacts in Tsushima. They were therefore in the unique position of not only being well informed of conditions in Korea, but having the organization and temperament to plan and carry out raids.

The raids of this phase were relatively small and infrequent when compared with those of the fourteenth century. In one of the few articles to focus on wakō during this period, *The Formative Years of the Wakō*, Benjamin Harrison Hazard finds only 9 recorded cases of Japanese marauding between the years of 1223 and 1265, though several others probably went unrecorded as the Koryo court was preoccupied with the Mongol invasion of the peninsula.³⁸ Additionally, it must be remembered that an instance of wakō raiding did not always mean a single attack. The pirates would frequently raid multiple villages, sometimes in multiple provinces to fill their ships before returning to Japan.

Wakō attacks in the first phase of piracy were typically carried out only once or twice a year by small bands of pirates using only one or two ships. However, even within this phase there is at least one recorded instance of “several tens of ships”, though this is most likely an overestimation.³⁹ The success rates of the wakō in their attempts to gather grains, slaves and valuables cannot have encouraged wide scale raiding. In a raid in 1225, Koryo court records indicate that nearly all the Japanese raiders were captured, half were killed in a 1226 raid, and 90 executed by a Japanese official in 1227. Though these cases demonstrate how high risk the raids of the thirteenth century were, they were not without their rewards, a spectacular example of which is a 1263 raid in which several of Koryo's tax ships were captured by a single wakō ship.

As evidenced by the final example, Koryo could not develop a very effective

military response to the wakō raids in either phase due to the need to defend the peninsula against more serious invasions. During the thirteenth century this threat came from the Mongols and then from incursions of northern tribes in the fourteenth. As the raids continued, Koryo sent envoys to complain to Japan, the first of which reached the bakufu's deputy in the Kyūshū region, Muto Sukeyori, in 1227. Sukeyori, taking matters into his own hands, had 90 of the pirates who had participated in a 1226 raid executed in front of Koryo's envoys and personally sent a letter of apology to the court in Korea.⁴⁰ This response by Sukeyori constitutes the only concrete measure to control piracy taken by Japanese officials during the first phase. However, the bakufu and to an even greater extent the court were outraged by Sukeyori's audacity. While there had been no official international relations on the part of the court prior to this action, it was obviously not the place of provincial officials in the eyes of the court or the bakufu to have direct dealings with the rulers of other states.

For their part, in 1232 the bakufu promulgated the *Goseibai Shikimoku*, a code of conduct for the Kamakura bakufu's vassals. One of the articles stipulated that the responsibility for suppressing piracy rested with the shugo, a fact that shows they were aware of the issue of piracy, but lacked the ability or the will to send central authorities to address the problem.⁴¹ Hazard asserts that the fact that the bakufu placed controlling piracy under the jurisdiction of the shugo demonstrates at least a nominal approval of Sukeyori's actions. However, this does not properly represent the issue at stake here. What was being denounced in 1227 was not the execution of the pirates, but the audacity of a provincial official, and a bakufu-appointed one at that, to interfere in international affairs by writing a letter, let alone one with as conciliatory a tone as that sent by Sukeyori. With akutō bands and piracy on the inland sea as well as abroad during the first

phase of wakō activity as prevalent as they were, the court would hardly be so incensed over the execution of criminals by a military official.

Sukeyori's swift response to the complaints of the Koryo envoys obviously demonstrates his wish to preserve good relations with his neighbors and enjoy the benefits that come from such a relationship, namely trade. While Korean sources do mention that the raids “abated somewhat”⁴² following Sukeyori's harsh and immediate punishment, the desperation of the inhabitants of Kyūshū and Tsushima was such that even this could not prevent their raiding ventures which would continue for over thirty years.

Alternatives to Piracy during the First Phase of Wakō Activity

As dire as the effects of famine, inflation, and official abuse were, there obviously were other options open to the residents of Kyūshū and Tsushima than just turning pirate or starving to death. Those that turned to piracy were obviously an extreme minority of the population in the first phase of piracy, though this varied depending on the region of Kyūshū, as in the case of the coastal villages of the Mutsu peninsula. Additionally, the options available to Kamakura housemen, those not tied to land, and those with titles were quite different from those options available to peasants. Piracy was a much more accessible option to the former group, who had the funds to charter such an adventure or the weapons and freedom of movement to participate. It was not such a viable option for many peasants, particularly for those living on agricultural estates. Shōen officials were entitled to seize the possessions and even families of peasants who absconded without paying their taxes.⁴³ For those peasants who felt they could not simply wait the bad times out, their alternatives to piracy that allowed them to avoid starvation included relying on

the measures taken by central authorities to soften the effects of this crisis period, selling ones self into slavery, or, from 1232 on, moving to an area not so affected by famine or official abuse.

As discussed before, the bakufu and court both took steps to ease the burdens on those suffering the effects of famine, though the resources and logistics to completely alleviate such a wide-spread catastrophe were not readily available. For instance, The bakufu could decree that temples loan rice (to be repaid with interest), but had little power to insure that these decrees were always carried out, particularly in the West. Therefore, they had little choice but to trust in the integrity of their regional officials, which, considering the volume of complaints levied against Kamakura housemen, was not guaranteed.

There was a seven year period in the 1230s in which the bakufu reversed the ban on selling one's self or one's family into slavery as a result of the famine.⁴⁴ As unattractive as this option might seem in the modern era, in medieval Japan selling one's self into slavery would mean shelter as well as regular meals, something that those considering such an action would be in dire need of. Selling one's family, in addition to the major draw of the money that could be procured, would of course likewise put that family member in the position of being fed and housed. Selling one's self into slavery was not legal prior to this period, though in spite of this the practice was still commonplace. The bakufu re-instituted the ban after the famine period of the 1230s although it was not followed.⁴⁵

Article 42 of the aforementioned Goseibai Shikimoku promulgated in 1232 offered another alternative to piracy. Prior to the code, peasants were tied to the land they were assigned to work and if they absconded, it was common for the jitō to destroy their

dwelling and seize their possessions, regardless of whether or not they had paid their dues in taxes or labor. Such actions constituted a common complaint to the bakufu against their housemen. However, article 42 states:

Of inflicting loss and ruin on absconding farmers under the pretext of punishing runaways.

When people living in the provinces run away and escape, the *ryoshu* and the others, proclaiming that runaways must be punished, detain their wives and children, and confiscate their property. Such a mode of procedure is quite the reverse of benevolent government. Henceforth, such must be referred [to Kamakura] for adjudication, and if it is found that the farmer is in arrears as regards payment of his annual rent and levies, he shall be compelled to make good the deficiency. If he is found not to be so in arrears the properties seized from him shall be forthwith restored to him, and it shall be entirely at the option of the farmer himself whether he shall continue to live in the fief or go elsewhere.⁴⁶

As William Wayne Farris points out in his analysis of this article, it amounts to allowing freedom of movement for the peasantry providing they had paid their taxes, leading to what he refers to as an increase in the “floating populace”.⁴⁷ Some members of this populace undoubtedly joined with the wakō, but others may have journeyed to areas in which the effects of the famine were not so keenly felt or to areas with more commercial activity where they could make a livelihood not contingent on farming. For those with titles, freedom, or money, other alternatives were available. Jitō could (and commonly did) attempt to draw double or triple taxes from the estates to which they were assigned. Others either formed or joined akutō bands, and still another option was trade.

International Trade in the Thirteenth Century

One mistake some scholars make in citing factors that led to wakō activity was an absence of legitimate trade outlets. There was indeed an absence of *official* trade, but not

an absence of *legitimate* trade by any means. Since the Heian period, there had been a policy in Japan of no official contact with foreign states, even extending so far as to ban ships from leaving Japan's coast. Official contact ended in 894 when the Japanese court decided that Chinese government and society (then under the Tang dynasty) was on the decline, and further missions to China would be neither profitable nor appropriate for Japan's court. This ban was not really enforced, as those who benefited most from unofficial trade and contact, namely the provincial officials, particularly the governor of Tsushima, would be the ones expected to enforce such a measure. As such, in the case of relations between Japan and Korea, and Japan and China, there was extensive contact between local powers in the form of trade while maintaining the policy of no correspondence on the part of either the court or the Kamakura bakufu. The Kamakura bakufu did authorize private trade starting in 1186 with no objections voiced by the court (at least officially). This policy was reversed in 1264, though even the bakufu does not appear to have followed the ban.⁴⁸

Japan's main exports during the medieval period were natural resources such as metals and wood, as well as manufactured goods including folding fans, paper, and especially Japanese swords, which were highly valued. Trade between Japan and China had been fairly constant since the Heian period, contrary to the wishes of the court. Chinese merchants had resided at Hakata bay in Kyūshū to facilitate and profit from this trade, though Japanese merchants began making the voyage to the continent in greater numbers beginning in the late twelfth century. From China, Japan imported a wide variety of goods including books, exotic animals, medicine, perfume, textiles, and ceramics. Significantly, Japan also imported a large amount of the Song dynasty's copper coins, leading to economic troubles in both nations.

In China, the scarcity of coins as a result of this mass exportation to Japan became such a problem that the court was forced to issue bans in 1199 and again in 1214 on Chinese merchants paying for foreign goods in coin. The trade continued however, and the coins became so prevalent in Japan that the bakufu was forced in 1226 to begin accepting coin as payment for rents.⁴⁹ The coins however disrupted not only the market economies in Kyoto and Hakata, but eventual inflation would make tax payments even more difficult for peasants who would have to produce even more grain to equal the worth of the payments in coin. At a time when jitō were already demanding double taxes, the inflation would have been a serious issue indeed, one which the central authorities as mentioned before attempted to control through price ceilings.

While it is known that trade definitely occurred between Japan and Korea, far less is known about the goods Japan imported from Korea than from China. Instead, it has been suggested that Korea played the role of intermediary at points, importing goods from China and then selling them to Japanese merchants.⁵⁰ Trade and international relations in this period, at least from Koryo's perspective, was carried out within the context of the tribute-trade system, with Koryo presenting tribute to China as a superior, and trading with Japan as an equal vassal state, though neither the court nor the bakufu had accepted investiture from the Chinese emperor at this point. The extent of trade between the two was such however, that Koryo built special residences for Japanese merchants to stay at in the port of Kumju, similar to those provided in Japan for the Chinese. The presence of this trade and the residences however, served to aid Japanese pirates in the thirteenth century.

Ships regularly traveling to and from Koryo for purposes of trade (in addition to those who fished the waters of the peninsula's coast) provided an information network for

the wakō, allowing them to better plan their raids. In addition, the pirates “brazenly” took advantage of the Koryo residences for the Japanese merchants. In 1226, pirates posed as merchants to gain access to the lodging, then under cover of darkness ransacked the nearby town.⁵¹ It was this raid that triggered the first official envoy from Korea to Japan regarding piratical activity. Though it did not reach the bakufu in Kamakura or the court in Kyoto, this envoy represents the beginning of a long series of renewed correspondence between Japan, China, and Korea over the wakō that would eventually be a deciding factor in the renewal of official relations between Japan and foreign states. This renewed correspondence as well as the activities of the wakō themselves would be disrupted, however, by the Mongol invasions of the late thirteenth century.

IV. The Mongol Invasions of Japan and Their Effects on Piracy (1274 and 1281)

The Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 constitute a marker for the gap between the first two phases of wakō activity. They served both to help bring the first phase to a close and as a result of their long-term effects, contributed to the recommencement of piracy in 1350. I will argue however, that while the changes in Japanese government and Japan's society caused by the invasions, particularly among the warrior class, had a significant impact on the second phase of piracy, they cannot be cited as a direct cause.

The Mongol Invasions

Prior to its first attempted invasion of Japan, the Mongol empire covered much of the European and Asian continents, including Northern China and the Korean peninsula. The Mongols had yet to conquer China's Southern Song, a valuable trading partner of the Japanese, but this would change before their second invasion of Japan. From their position in Korea, the Mongols considered Japan a desirable acquisition for two reasons. First, because of how close it was to the peninsula, and second, because of its connections to the Southern Song.⁵² The bakufu and the court received their first indication that Mongol forces were planning an invasion in 1268 in the form of a letter sent through Korea demanding that Japan submit to Mongol authority. By this time, the Mongol leader Kubilai Kahn had already conquered the Korean peninsula and was well on its way to its eventual takeover of China in 1279. Neither the bakufu nor the court drafted an official reply to this letter, or any of those following in the years leading to the first invasion. Additionally, the representative of central authorities in the region, Kyūshū headquarters, did not allow any Mongol envoys to continue to Kamakura or Kyoto to meet directly with the rulers of Japan.⁵³ Following years of threats, the first invasion came in the fall of 1274. The Mongols quickly captured Tsushima and Iki before a combination of Kyūshū's coastal defense and near destruction of the Mongol fleet by a storm forced the invaders to abandon their effort.

This was merely a temporary setback, as the Mongols sent envoys again the next year that actually made it to Kamakura. The reagent for the military government, Hōjō Tokimune however, had them executed, a huge affront to the Mongol government.⁵⁴ Kubilai Kahn attempted again to invade Japan in 1281, this time sending two fleets, one from the newly-conquered Chinese coast and the other from Korea. The battles lasted two

months until the Mongols were again thwarted by a second storm that destroyed a majority of their ships. Many temples following the invasions would demand payment from the central authorities, claiming it was their prayers that had summoned the kamikaze, or divine winds, that had destroyed the Mongol fleets. These invasions had far-reaching consequences in Japan, both short and long-term, and contributed greatly to the huge wave of piracy that would follow nearly 70 years after.

The Effects of the Mongol Invasions

The immediate effect of Mongol presence in Korea and China and their invasions of Japan was to create a break between the first two phases of wakō activity. The presence of Mongol fleets in Korea and coastal China made the risk of raiding far greater than the rewards. Japan's response to Mongol threats also contributed to causing such a break. The regent Tokimune most likely took such a hard line against the Mongols not only for the preservation of Japan's independence and his own position, but because he saw in the foreign threat a chance to solve Japan's domestic disorder and violence. Records indicate that he attempted to have akutō bands in Kyoto sent to Kyūshū to aid in the defense efforts, and warriors who were occupied in fighting off a foreign invasion would have less time to engage in the lawless behavior that plagued the countryside at the time.⁵⁵ Additionally, pirate bands such as the Matura gang were also brought in to defend the coasts. This plan would prove to be a double-edged sword however, for even if the Mongol invasions temporarily stalled the wakō, they came back in full force in the 1350s, seemingly stronger for the tactics and organization they acquired as a result of the invasions.⁵⁶

Some scholars assert that it was *because* of the Mongol invasions that the raiding

began again, as groups like the Matsura gang wanted revenge on Korea for their part in the invasions since the Matsura peninsula was particularly hard hit. This view however does not hold up when one considers how low-risk the raids were once the Mongol forces withdrew from Korea, the fact that raiders from the previous phase also came from these areas without the provocation of revenge, and the fact that the wakō did not recommence their activity until 70 years after the invasions.⁵⁷

The Mongol raids also directly led to the increased impoverishment of the warrior class and the fall of the Kamakura bakufu in 1333. The Kamakura bakufu typically both secured the loyalty of their vassals and repaid their supporters with entitlements to profits from land through jitō appointments. The problem with such a rewards system was that it functioned well in times of civil war when land changed hands between the bakufu and its enemies, but in the case of the Mongols, this was a foreign invasion. Therefore, there was no new land with which to repay the warriors, nearly all of which came from Kyūshū, who had contributed both financially and personally to the coastal defense.⁵⁸ In order to meet the demands of their warriors as well as the temples who claimed to have summoned the storms that destroyed the Mongol fleets, the bakufu was forced to divide their existing stewardships into smaller portions. The formal rights to land that these positions often entailed did not necessarily mean direct control of that land, or even that a sufficient income was derivable.⁵⁹

The financial difficulties of Kamakura warriors in Kyūshū following the Mongol invasions was exacerbated by the practice of dividing inheritance among all of one's offspring, male and female. This continued to such an extent that the parcels of land being bequeathed were no longer profitable.⁶⁰ This problem was so severe in Kyūshū specifically due to the fact that the warriors of the region had personally financed much

of the defense without proper repayment, that the bakufu issued an edict five years after the second invasion stating that Kyūshū housemen could no longer leave land holdings to women until they could be assured that the Mongol threat was indeed gone.⁶¹ Gradually the bakufu's retainers switched from this divided inheritance pattern to designating a single heir, but it remains easy to see why the easy profits to be gained from piracy in the mid fourteenth century would appeal to those depending on such unprofitable holdings. This inability of the Kamakura bakufu to satisfactorily repay the warriors they demanded service from narrowed their base of support among their vassals. This coupled with disputes between the court and bakufu over imperial succession and general dissatisfaction with bakufu rule led to its being overthrown by forces mobilized by the Emperor Godaigo in 1333.

V. The Muromachi Bakufu and the Era of Southern and Northern Courts

In 1333, Emperor Godaigo became the first emperor since the eclipse of the position's power by regents and retired emperors during the Heian period and the establishment of the Kamakura bakufu nearly 150 years earlier to truly rule as well as reign, though his rule was incredibly brief. In the three year period known as the Kemmu Restoration, Godaigo ignored the fact that it was the military might of the warrior class that had brought him to power and attempted to revert to the exclusive court rule of the Heian period. Part of this policy included the elevating of the positions of court nobles over those of the warriors and the granting of shugo positions and estates to court

officials rather than the men who had fought for him.⁶² The most powerful military family that assisted Godaigo in his rout of the Kamakura Bakufu was the Ashikaga family, former retainers of the bakufu. The Ashikaga saw that Godaigo's policies would eventually lead to a disenfranchisement of the warrior class, what they viewed as a betrayal by the emperor, and the head of the Ashikaga family, Ashikaga Takauji, rebelled against Godaigo in 1336.

Taking the imperial regalia with him, Godaigo fled to the mountains south of Kyoto and established a court-in-exile while Takauji installed a new emperor on the throne in Kyoto. Thus began the period of conflict between the co-called Southern Court of Godaigo and the bakufu-backed Northern Court in Kyoto. Ashikaga Takauji of course also established the new Muromachi bakufu military government, so named for its location in the Muromachi district of Kyoto from 1378 on. In this section, I will argue that the resulting disorder engendered by the ongoing civil war handicapped the ability of either courts or bakufu to control the wakō that soon took to raiding Korea and coastal China as a way of life.

The Muromachi Bakufu and the Effects of Civil War

Like the Kamakura bakufu, the Muromachi Bakufu came to power with the support of a large network of warrior vassals and as such, needed to devise a system of payment to secure their continued loyalty. Whereas the Kamakura bakufu used the position of jitō, the Muromachi bakufu began in 1352 to use a system called *hanzei* to pay their vassals, in which bakufu appointees would split the profits for a designated area of land in half with the land's proprietor.⁶³ This was actually a measure that not only paid vassals, but actually somewhat protected the shōen proprietors from warriors who might

otherwise have attempted to seize *all* of the proceeds, claiming them for military purposes in the period of civil war. It was also an attempt to halt abuse by jitō trying to seize additional holdings within the shōen.

The Kamakura and Muromachi bakufu were similar in the sense that both functioned alongside existing structures for rule by the court in Kyoto, but the Muromachi bakufu did not limit itself mainly to arbitrating local conflicts as its predecessor had in its early years, and played a role in international relations as well as almost every other aspect of domestic administration, though this administration was in practice, not very effective. The Ashikaga did not truly govern Japan from the center. There was a very pronounced shift away from central authority in this period, as evidenced by the fact that the Muromachi bakufu did not have enough authority or influence in the Kyūshū region to appoint its own vassals as officials. Instead, the bakufu functioned more as a body for legitimizing the growing power of local officials in the provinces and left administration to them as shugo once they nominally recognized the authority of the bakufu.⁶⁴ This shows a shift in the role of shugo from mere intermediaries between local powers and the central authority, as they were in the Kamakura period, to regional leaders in their own right, a stage Thomas Nelson cites as a midway point between centralized rule and the autonomous regional rulers of the later medieval period.⁶⁵

The bakufu's deputy in Kyūshū was responsible for keeping order and played an important role in international relations. In the Muromachi period however, the shugo would often pass over the Kyūshū Deputy and report directly to the bakufu, diminishing even the deputy's regional influence.⁶⁶ This lack of authority in the west from the beginnings of the Muromachi Bakufu was compounded by the fact that the bakufu's

enemies in the civil war, the Northern Court, already had a firm foothold in the region. The Ashikaga tried to maintain power by playing powerful Kyūshū families off of one another, who either allied themselves with the Southern Court or the bakufu more in a bid to crush their rival families than out of any real sense of loyalty.⁶⁷

The effects of this civil war, lasting from 1336 to 1392, were profoundly felt in Kyūshū. One scholar describes that Kyūshū was “simply abandoned”⁶⁸ by the Muromachi bakufu during the most intense periods of conflict. This view stands to scrutiny when one considers the extent to which the wakō, akutō, and abusive jitō went unchecked in Kyūshū during the fourteenth century. The explosion in such unruly elements is explained in part by the impact of the battles over the Northern and Southern Courts on the population of Kyūshū. The battles would put a strain financially on the warriors themselves, but another effect was the destruction of entire villages and the regions around them as a result of the small-scale siege warfare that was the tactic at the time. In a table compiled by William Wayne Farris on commoner suffering during the wars between the Southern and Northern Courts, Kyūshū provinces are recorded as enduring burned and damaged villages (including a particularly severe year in 1374 in which “all Kyūshū” experienced damaged villages), provisioning, and crop-stealing.⁶⁹ Such difficulties were felt all the more profoundly due to the fact that the mid fourteenth century was another period of famine and other natural disasters, though not quite as severe as in the thirteenth century.

One of the main obstacles to the bakufu consolidating their hold on Kyūshū during the civil war was the presence of one of Godaigo's sons, Prince Kanenaga who exercised a significant amount of control over not only shugo and local warriors, but relations with Ming China.⁷⁰ The bakufu did not move decisively to correct this weakness

until the late fourteenth century and did not experience much success against the Southern Court's forces in the region for nearly a decade. Throughout this period, wakō numbers were growing to such levels that Kanenaga even incorporated bands of pirates to fight against the bakufu.⁷¹ Periods in which Kanenaga managed to consolidate his authority, such as in 1365 when he defeated key Ashikaga vassals in Kyūshū, correspond to swells in the number of wakō raids in Korea and China. This may have been because Kanenaga cut loose his pirate auxiliaries as they were not as urgently needed anymore, freeing them to raid abroad.⁷² As seen with the Mongol invasions, this incorporation of pirate bands into military forces would result in greater levels of organization and a chance to learn and test new tactics resulting in more devastatingly effective raids.

VI. The Second Phase of Wakō Activity (1350 - Early 1400s)

In 1350, 14 years after the start of the civil war, the second phase of piracy began. This phase was completely different from the first in both scale and frequency. Powerful Kyushu clans joined with or sponsored raids by the Matura gang (who had expanded to ten times their size of the first phase) and other wakō bands. Whereas in 1200s, raids had involved one to two ships, they now involved over three hundred ships, thousands of pirates and raided up to forty times a year. In this section, I will examine factors such as motivation for raiding, changing conditions in Korea and China, and international relations between the three nations to explain why this phase of raiding was so

devastating and why it was ultimately suppressed.

The most important difference in the first and second phase of wakō activity is the motivation behind each phase. Whereas the raids of the 1200s were motivated by desperation, those of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries were primarily profit-based ventures, carried out on such a large scale by such a wide variety of people that one scholar remarks that “piracy was, indeed, regarded as an honorable profession for any class.”⁷³ While “honorable” may not be entirely accurate, piracy was certainly a profitable profession for any class during this phase. This accounts for the massive scale of the raids, their frequency, and even the fact that they were able to be suppressed by factors other than just military force (though the Choson court that replaced the Koroyo in Korea in 1392 did manage to use military force rather effectively, as we will see). Additionally, because these were profit-based venture, the discussion of alternatives to piracy in this period seems irrelevant as the *necessity* to raid is not as present in this second phase.

Becoming a wakō was not typically a last resort in the fourteenth century. The wakō of the first phase continued operations despite instances of mass execution by Japanese authorities and overwhelming defeat from the Korean army motivated more by the reward of survival than money. However, these threatening factors were simply not prevalent until the end of the second phase of raiding, making marauding very low risk with very high profit. When the risks of a Korean navy and the rewards of legitimate profit through tally trade and incorporation into the Korean administration system were introduced in the early 1400s, they heralded the end of a two century long period of Japanese piracy, for the wakō that would reappear in China in the sixteenth century were of a quite different sort.

While the primary motivation during the second phase was profit, there were most likely elements among the wakō that did experience the same sense of desperation as their predecessors. While there was widespread famine reported in 1349, the year before the next generation of wakō became active, a famine near the scale of those in the 1200s did not occur until 1360. It has been estimated, however, that this famine may have killed more than a quarter of the population of Japan.⁷⁴ Even if this estimate is exaggerated, such a large famine could have exacerbated piracy as it did in the previous phase.

One of the reasons the threat of starvation was not as prevalent a factor despite these natural disasters in the thirteenth century was the advent of new agricultural techniques. Methods such as double-cropping, raised fields, greater use of fertilizers, and the creation of irrigation ponds served to increase the yield of fields being worked. Furthermore, from the end of the thirteenth century through the fourteenth, the amount of arable land was expanded with the conversion of dry fields to paddy. This was partially accomplished through widespread adoption of irrigation techniques that would keep the water level necessary for growing rice in these new paddies during the dry months.⁷⁵ It was double-cropping in particular though that provided a significant increase in the amount of food available in the months where peasants would otherwise have been living entirely on dwindling stores of the previous seasons harvest. Finally, iron tools became more widely available which allowed for further expansion of fields, particularly valuable to the growing numbers of small private farms.⁷⁶

One of the more significant factors contributing to piracy was the relatively low risk of raiding the Korean peninsula in the 1350s. The ease of raiding was most likely due to the fact that the Mongols were too busy suppressing rebellions in China to send military aid to Koryo, whom they had forbidden to build warships or even keep arms,

leaving them woefully unprepared to meet the threat of the wakō.⁷⁷ The wakō raids of this period were much more frequent and on a larger scale than those of the 1200s. Raids could involve thousands of pirates using hundreds of ships, even small cavalries, to wreak havoc on both coastal and inland villages and farms. This was a far cry from the two-ship raids of the first phase. The wakō struck the peninsula an average of five times a year beginning in 1350, but from 1376 to 1384, this number soared to over forty raids a year.⁷⁸ The return to less intense levels following 1384 may have been as a result of a gradual shift in wakō activity to Southern China, where they ransacked coastal areas as they had on the peninsula. Raiding the Korean coasts was no longer as profitable due to the amount of devastation and disruption in farming the wakō had already caused as well as advances in the Korean defense.⁷⁹ As with the raids of the previous phase, both China and Korea were quick to send envoys to Japan to demand that the court control its subjects. These efforts and the bakufu's receptiveness to them mark a pronounced shift in East Asian relations which would signal the decline of the wakō.

The Role of Trade and Relations in the Second Phase of Wakō Activity (1350-1419)

International relations (and consequently, the suppression of the wakō) were complicated during the second phase of wakō activity by a number of factors. First, both Korea and China experienced dynastic changes that would have profound impacts on relations, trade, and the suppression of piracy. In China, a poor peasant rose to become the head of a force of rebels that eventually drove the Mongols from Southern and Central China. In 1368, he became Hongwu, the first emperor of the newly established Ming dynasty.⁸⁰ In Hongwu's opinion, China needed to return to the Confucian ideals that

had fallen out of practice since the Song Dynasty. Domestically, this meant a return to an agrarian economy. Internationally, it meant a return to the tribute-trade system of trade and foreign relations. However, Hongwu's attempts to incorporate Japan into such a system were stymied for a number of years by internal disorder in Japan that profoundly affected Kyūshū, the traditional first stop for foreign envoys.

Beginning in 1336 and lasting until 1392, Japan experienced another period of civil war over the legitimacy of rival courts, one backed by the bakufu, the Northern Court, and its rival, a court-in-exile now referred as the Southern Court. The Southern Court may not have had the power of the bakufu to support it, but it did have control of Kyūshū. This meant that powerful representatives of the Southern Court would be the first to receive Chinese envoys, a fact that could potentially aid its cause in fighting the bakufu. A monopoly over international relations with China was a great source of power and wealth when handled properly. Unfortunately, the son of the emperor of the Southern Court, Prince Kanenaga, was the Kyūshū representative of the Southern Court but did not handle affairs properly and was not at all the vassal the Ming were hoping for. While Kanenaga effectively controlled Kyūshū from the 1360s on, he was unschooled in foreign relations. Therefore, the other serious impediment to stemming the flow of wakō raiders was the basic inability of Ming China and Korea to find anyone to take responsibility for combating the pirates.

Hongwu began sending envoys to Japan nearly as soon as he established his new dynasty, seeking the legitimacy and security that would come from vassals pledging their loyalty to his position in addition to demanding that Japan put a stop to the wakō raids that had recommenced nearly 20 years prior. Rather than his envoys reaching the power center in Kyoto, they were stopped by Kanenaga in Kyūshū. While Kanenaga did accept

the title of “King Ryokai” from the Ming as well as the responsibility of controlling piracy, he was extremely irregular in his allegiance, sometimes going so far as to execute Ming envoys and other times behaving as a model vassal, controlling piracy by incorporating the wakō into his forces to do battle against the bakufu.⁸¹ The bakufu was able to take control of foreign relations in 1392 when it conquered the forces of the Southern Court, but this too was only a nominal control through the bakufu's deputy in Kyūshū and powerful families in the region. It was not until 1399 that Ashikaga Yoshimitsu himself took control of international relations, followed shortly by his investiture as King of Japan by Hongwu's successor, Yongle in 1404.

The Chinese World Order and the Tribute-Trade System

Trade and foreign relations between China and other East Asian nations was largely governed by what John King Fairbank has termed “the Chinese world order”.⁸² This order is based on the Confucian concept that the world, called “all under heaven”⁸³ is arranged in an organized hierarchy with China at the center. Other nations were ranked within the hierarchy based on their level of compliance with the rules governing the world order, which can be simplified into three imperatives : the rulers of “barbarian” (non-Chinese) countries must accept the status of vassal to the Chinese emperor, they must adopt the Chinese calendar and writing system, and they must send envoys to present tribute to China on a regular basis, normally once every year to twenty years depending on the nation, and particularly when a new emperor took the throne.⁸⁴

The way such a system played out geographically put China at the center of three zones radiating outward with the different zones, the Sinic Zone, the Inner Asian Zone,

and the Outer Zone, representing various degrees of perceived barbarism. As explained by Fairbank:

...first, the Sinic Zone consisting of the most nearby and culturally similar tributaries, Korea and Vietnam...the Ryukyu Islands and, at brief times, Japan. Secondly, the Inner Asian Zone, consisting of tributary tribes and states of the nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples of Inner Asia who were not only ethnically and culturally non-chinese but were also outside or on the fringe of the Chinese culture area...Third, the Outer Zone, consisting of the “outer barbarians” generally, at a further distance over land or sea, including eventually Japan and other states of Southeast and South Asia and Europe that were supposed to send tribute when trading.⁸⁵

The benefits of such a system to China are obvious. When a new emperor took the throne, envoys from other states would have to come seek re-investiture as a vassal state. This served to confirm the authority of the new emperor within China. Additionally, China profited from expanded tribute-trade networks both politically and economically. It could import the goods it needed and wanted, while trade being presented entirely a matter of tribute let China maintain the guise that it did not need to *rely* on less civilized states for any of the goods. Militarily, China benefited from the buffer zones of nomadic tribes that constituted the bulk of defense forces in the border areas. But what were the advantages for other states to enter such a system?

One of the incentives for rulers in East Asian countries to enter the Chinese world order was an acknowledgment of that ruler's absolute authority within their own country, even if they had accepted a vassal status within the Chinese political system. The recognition and symbols of investiture from such a powerful empire as China would serve to cement the status of the ruler politically, protecting them from attack by neighboring tribes as well as China itself as long as the ruler properly played its role of vassal. Economically, he reaped the benefits of a monopoly on trade with China, as per

the rules of the tribute-trade system.

The tribute-trade system was composed of an elaborate series of rules governing ceremony, exchange of goods, and official contact between the states or tribes involved. Once accepting an official position within China's hierarchy, vassals were expected to send official envoys to present tribute to China in the form of local products and memorials on occasions such as the crowning of a new emperor. In return, the vassal would receive imperial gifts and trading rights both at and outside the Chinese capital.⁸⁶ The rules of this system are not as rigid as they first appear however. Less powerful Chinese dynasties could not always afford to turn away vassals that did not play along properly for reasons of military necessity. Other times, dynasties such as the Song dynasty that was in power throughout the first phase of wakō activity had a much more liberal trade policy and therefore allowed merchant families to trade with nations such as Japan outside of official relations as well as with states like Koryo that could be considered the model vassal state. These practices would then be reversed during the second phase of piracy with the establishment of the Ming Dynasty and the efforts of its emperors to return China to strictly tribute-based trade through the adoption of a tally-trade system. Such a system, adopted in both Korea and China, went a long way toward influencing pirate leaders to give up their marauding by making an honest exchange of goods more profitable.

Yoshimitsu was (and still is to some extent) vilified by both his contemporaries and Japanese historians for putting Japan in the position of a vassal state to China, but in reality, he had little choice if he wanted to continue to trade with the Ming. In 1374, Hongwu had effectively ended the era of free trade between Japan and China by closing the three major trading ports frequented by foreign merchants and refusing to accept any

trade that did not come in the form of tribute.⁸⁷ The entry of Japan into the Chinese world order was mutually beneficial. Yoshimitsu secured the right to trade with China in the form of a tribute ship every ten years and trading rights at other Chinese ports, and China could now make demands upon him to do something about the piracy stemming from his shores. The wakō pirates figure heavily in correspondence between the two, with Yongle sending pages of flowery praise when wakō attacks began to dwindle in the early 1400s.⁸⁸ The end of regular wakō attacks can be attributed more accurately not to Yoshimitsu's actions however, but to the actions of the new Choson dynasty in Korea, the Tsushima governor, and powerful merchant families of Kyūshū.

The Suppression of the Second Phase of Wakō Activity

The Koryo dynasty was in shambles during the second phase of wakō activity. Japanese and Korean marauding ensured that tax shipments could not make it to the capital by sea, and the wakō penetrated so far inland on the peninsula now that the shipments were no longer save over land either. Additionally, the dynasty was facing armed challenges in the north from invading tribes that constituted an even greater threat than the wakō.⁸⁹ Eventually, gross court mismanagement in the face of natural disasters and multiple invasions led to a revolution and the establishment of a new court, the Choson, in 1392. The Choson began a policy of tackling wakō activity through a combination of military might and incorporation of pirate leaders, for whom raiding had by this point become more of a way of life than a necessity, into a tally-trade system, a process Korean historian Kenneth Robinson dubbed “turning raiders into traders”. The Choson recognized that the real powers in Kyūshū were not the central government, but

powerful local families. Thus, he began a process of incorporating them into the new tally-trade system in return for promises to suppress the wakō in their region, particularly in the case of the powerful So family of Tsushima.⁹⁰ Additionally, the Choson incorporated the pirate leaders themselves into this system. Suddenly, the wakō were able to turn a profit without risking loss of life and many were more than willing to comply, particularly when the Choson clarified their stance on piracy when raiding briefly recommenced in 1418 after the death of the leader of the So family head. Korean forces invaded Tsushima, nearly wiping out all of the pirate strongholds in the Oei Invasion of 1419.⁹¹

These new tally-trade and incorporation systems in China and Korea played a major role in finally suppressing major waves of pirate activity in the early 1400s in a number of ways. Many powerful merchant families had developed in all three nations as a result of the earlier era of free trade, and several in Kyūshū had turned to piracy to augment their profits while other pirate bands rose with solely the profit to be turned by theft in mind. The end of free trade would have only served to exacerbate the piracy and smuggling problems had the Choson and Ming dynasties not replaced them with the tally-trade system. The incorporation of powerful families into the tribute system also meant that there was now an incentive for those families to control the wakō and akutō bands in their region to keep relations friendly with their trading partners. Finally, the reward of trade without the risk of execution was an attractive one for many pirate leaders who accepted their new position as more or less honest traders.

This policy of the Choson is remarkable in that it perfectly illustrates the need to view the wakō from a perspective other than the center. The overtures of the Koryo court in the 1200s and the 1300s to Japan's central government as well as the letters of Hongwu

were ultimately ineffective because they ignored the reality of power distribution in Japan at the time. Effective authority was not exercised in the center, but by local and border authorities. Therefore, the Choson policy of engaging them directly, who could in turn exercise direct control over the former wakō, was the strategy that ended this era of Japanese piracy.

Conclusions

The wakō pirates of the 12-1400s cannot be examined as if in a vacuum. An understanding of a surprisingly wide range of factors is necessary to answer the question of why these raids occurred. On an international scale, free trade practices and a lack of official government contact by either court or bakufu for much of the first two phases of marauding contributed greatly to the information networks of the wakō while preventing a collaborative international response. Additionally, the Mongol takeover of China and the Korean peninsula and their attempted invasions of Japan initially prohibited raiding, but their eventual withdrawal from these regions left them in shambles and opened them up to raids by profit-seeking pirates. Within Japan, a nearly constant series of civil wars and power struggles between imperial court and military government during the medieval period occupied much of the attention of the power centers in Kyoto and Kamakura. Another characteristic of Japan's medieval period, the shift from central to regional authority, encouraged corruption in regional officials. It also made a strong response by

the bakufu against the wakō more difficult, enabling raiding until the Choson court found a way to exploit this by collaborating with local powers over the ineffective central government. Finally, on an individual level the near constancy of armed conflict made many Japanese more disposed to piracy and other violent acts and the victories of powers in the east meant an increase in the population of unemployed warriors in the west for whom piracy would be an attractive option. Periods of intense natural disasters also pushed many who did not have the same experience with bloodshed to the point of desperation.

It was only once each of these issues was addressed that Japanese piracy finally began to decline. The Choson court engaged local powers to devise a system whereby former pirates could continue to make a profit without plundering. This mind for profit was shared by the military bakufu in Japan, who finally began to reach out to foreign nations in hopes of making a profit through the resumption of official trade. Significantly, central authorities in Japan also consolidated their authority in the west for the first time since military rule began, making the enforcement of government policies and the attention to details of provincial rule in Kyūshū possible once more. For the peasants of Kyūshū, advances in farming techniques and a temporary end to civil war meant a moment to recover from the factors that had kept them at the point of desperation for centuries. It is important to keep these desperate people on the edge of society in mind when one considers the fact that the wakō virtually defined Japan's relations with Korea and China in the early 1400s, an impact that would be felt for centuries to come.

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