

# The Development of the War Flags of Japanese Feudal Lords in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries

TETSUO KATO

Before explaining the history of war flags of Japan, I would like to describe the main differences between a Western coat of arms and a Japanese family crest (*mon*), and their relationship to flags. Both were developed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century—the coat of arms in Western Europe and the family crest in Japan; both have a close relationship to flags. In Western Europe, the figures and colors depicted on a shield became a coat of arms and then a flag. In Japan, on the contrary, flags were created first then progressed to family crests—the main element of the flag was always the family crest.

Although coats of arms and family crests evolved independently, they share many features. A Western coat of arms represents just one person while a Japanese family crest represents an entire family or clan (but when a family crest is used by a samurai on the battlefield, it served the same role as a coat of arms). Initially, both symbols could be used only by the noble class, but over time, the Japanese family crest became available to everyone.

There are two types of family crests in Japan, the noble's crest and the samurai's crest. Nobles first placed their favorite designs on ox-drawn carriages and kimonos. These designs gradually became established as crest patterns. Around the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the samurai began to adorn their houses with screens containing their crests. At the same time they started to war with each other, so colored flags were used in battle to distinguish friend from foe. For example, the Genji used white banners while the Heike used red banners, although crests had not yet appeared on those flags.

Crests were widely used in the city of Kyoto, the capital of ancient Japan. At that time, the crests were refined and became an aristocratic hobby. The new designs not only used flowers and trees but also interior designs. The samurai were quite impressed with the patterns produced by the nobles. However, the samurai used rough designs for their crests which were less detailed than their noble counterparts.

Flags with crests began to appear in 1185 at the start of the Kamakura Bakufu (tent government). The Bakufu's leader, Minamoto Yoritomo, adopted a plain white banner and forbade any of his subordinates to use the same design. Instead, they could use a flag of any color with a crest painted on it. The first depiction of such a flag was in 1274-1281 on a scroll showing the defeat of the Mongols by the samurai. Then, at the end of the Muromachi Era, the power of the government declined. Even a person of a lower class, if competent, was able to advance in feudal Japan. During this time, the Sengoku era (civil war) changed the nature of combat and saw an increase of the different forms of war flags.

During the Azuchi Momoyama Period (1568-1600), many battles were fought among the samurai to gain control of Japan, and the flags of major lords—such as Tokugawa, Takeda, and Oda—appeared on the battlefield. Tokugawa used a golden crest on a long white flag, the character 五 (*go*, five) on a square white flag, and the rising sun on a golden fan. Takeda used the character 大 (*dai*, big) on a square white flag, a long all-white flag, a long black-and-white flag, and a white flag bearing three black circles. Like Tokugawa, Takeda also used the rising sun motif on a banner (this design is the current national flag of Japan). Oda used a crest derived from a coin on a white banner; topping it was

a small white flag with quotes from the Buddha. Many war flags were created between 1450 and 1650.

In the Edo Period (1603-1867), the country was united under the leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu. In the course of the Tokugawa Bakufu, he consolidated power over all realms as Emperor of all Japan. The former war flags were used as offerings to Buddhist temples or for ceremonial purposes.

# The Development of The War Flags of Japanese Feudal Lords in 12~16th century

Japanese Vexillological Association  
TETSUO KATO



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# 1 Features of Japanese Family Crest and the relation to a Coat of Arms of Western Europe and Flags

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Before explaining history of war flags of Japan, I would like to describe main differences between a Coat of Arms of Western Europe and Family Crest of Japan, and also a relation with flags.

- 1-1 A Coat of Arms, Family Crest and flags have a close relation. In the case of Japan, flags were first generated and progressed to crests. The base of the flag was always Family Crest.
- 1-2 In the case of Western Europe, on the contrary, the figure and the color drawn on a shield became a Coat of Arms and a flag.
- 1-3 Only Western Europe has a Coat of Arms and Japan has Family Crest in the world. It is very interesting that a Coat of Arms and Family Crest were generated in 12 century.
- 1-4 Although a Coat of Arms and a Family Crest progressed independently, there are many common features.
- 1-5 While a Western Coat of Arms is composed of an "individual" unit, a Family Crest of Japan is composed of a "house" unit. But, Japanese Family Crest used by Samurai on the battlefield was composed of "individual" unit with successive nature, therefore this is considered being similar to a Coat of Arms of Western Europe.
- 1-6 The Western Coat of Arms and Japanese Family Crest belonged to Nobles, but in Japan all people could use Family Crest as a time progressed.



## 2 The Birth of Crest of nobles in Japan

(‘Family Crest’ is henceforth called ‘Crest’)

2-1 There are 2 types of Crests in Japan. Namely, noble's Crest and Samurai's Crest.

2-2 Nobles interwove their favorite designs with ox-drawn carriage and Kimonos. These designs had been gradually and firmly established in Crest.

source: 'Nihon Monshougaku'

Picture Scroll on 'Heiji Story', source: 'Saitama Kenritu Museum'  
an ox-drawn carriage with Crest on 1120~1160 AD



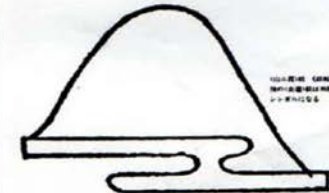
### Ancient Crests of Japan

#### 'Two Cranes' crest



《古代文様集》春日殿記上9

#### A Mist hanging at the foot of hill' crest



《古今和歌集》卷下  
新古今和歌集卷下  
新古今和歌集卷下



### 3. The start of Crests of Samurai Class

3-1. At the end of 12 century, many Samurai surrounded their houses with Crests-dyed screens.

3-2. Leaders of Samurai appeared in 12 century fought a battle each other. Genji corps flattered white flag and Heike corpse red. Flag colors were very useful to distinguish enemy and ally.

3-3 But at that time, they did not use their Crests on their war flags yet.

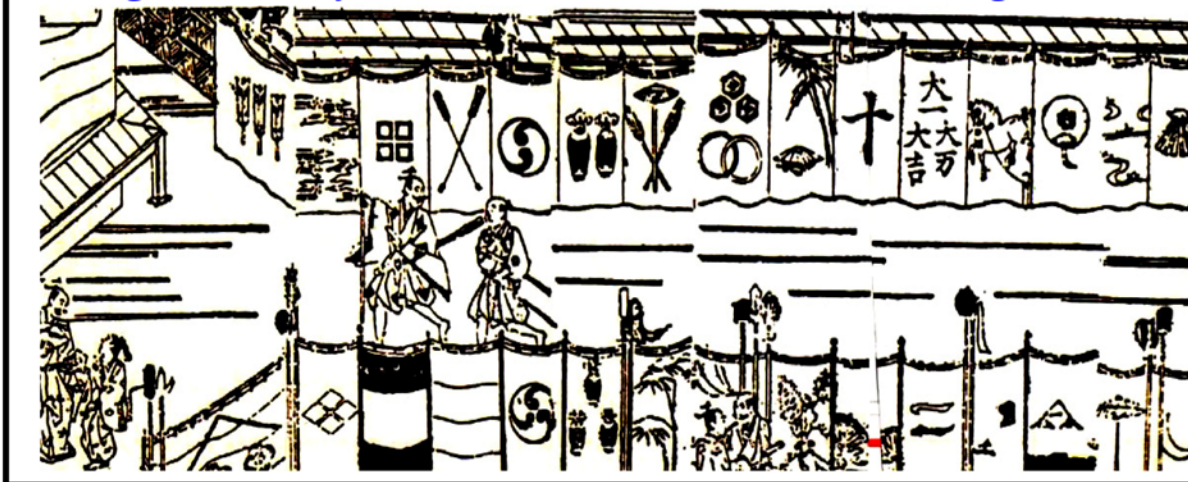
Genpei White & Red flags  
source:Genpeikassenzu-Emaki

Kobe Shiritu Musum



The Soga Bros. Story 1193

source:'Nihon Monshogaku'





# 4. A spread of Crests to Samurai classes from the Nobles at the end of 12 century

- 4-1. Crests had been established widely in Kyoto (ancient capital city).
- 4-2. Crests were refined and aristocratic hobby. The Nobles used not only flowers and trees, but also interior decorations for crest design.
- 4-3. Samurai admired the Crests of nobles and imitated them. Although their Crests were un-refined, simple and direct, Samurai made various Crests under the necessities.

<LEFT:Noble Crest> → <RIGHT: Samurai Crests> source: 'Nihon Kamonyurai Soran'

Three Sparrow



Comma-shaped figures



The dyeing cast



No. 1



The Piony



The Mulberry Flower



The three eyes



The No. 2



The Gentian Wheel



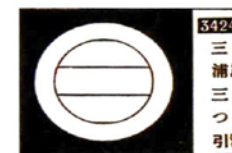
The Iris



The four eyes



The No. 3





## 5. The start of War flag, Kamakura era , 1185~1333

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5-1 Minamoto Yoritomo who opened The Kamakura Bakufu (Kamakura Government) in 1185 adopted white flag as his own flag. The white was special and sacred color. He did not allow his subordinates to use all white flag and ordered them to use a flag with their Crests. This is called to be a first flag with Crest in Japan

5-2 In 1274 and 1281, Mongolia invaded Japan two times and samurai defended together against Mongolia. The situation at that time is described in the picture scroll. This is the first record of the flag with Crest in Japan.

A: Crests on the flag in Kamakura period

B: Picture scroll on the battle between Japan and Mongolia, 1274,1281  
source: A: Nihon-Monshougaku, B: Moko Shurai Ekotoba, Museum Kyushu Univ.







## 6 From Muromachi to Sengoku period(the civil war era), 1334-1560

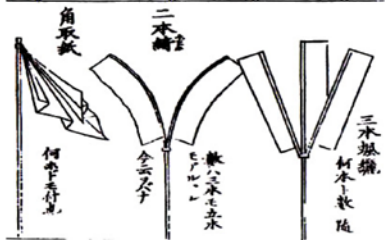
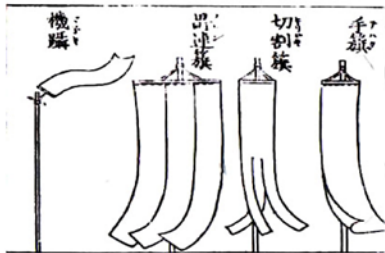
6-1 At the end of the Muromachi period, the power of the government declined. It was the time when the competent persons survived a war and won promotion, even if he was a person of low class.

6-2 During the civil war era, the number of samurai increased and the battle changed to the group combat from a single combat. And the distinguished war services became overlooked sometimes.

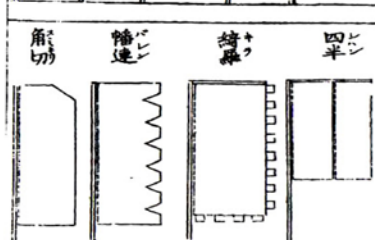
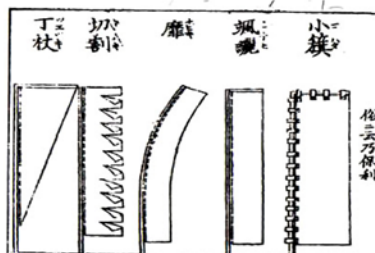
6-3 For this reason, conspicuous flags increased in number as below.

Changes of War Flag forms source: 'Buyobenryaku' written in 1600s

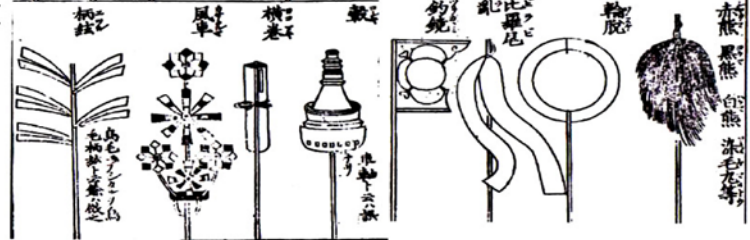
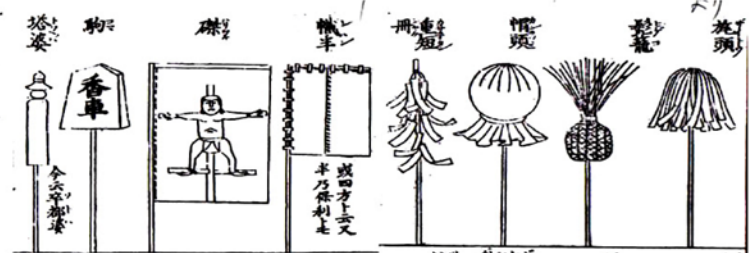
< ~ 1470 >



< 1470 ~ 1550 >



< 1550 ~ 1650 >





## 7 Azuchi Momoyama period, 1568–1600

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7-1 In this time, Samurai fought a battle ruling over the whole country of Japan. Picture below is a painting on a folding screen of the battle among leaders of Sumurai such as Takeda, and Tokugawa and Oda ally. You can see many war flags there.

Painting on a folding screen 'Nagashino Battle' source: 'Zusetsu Sengokukassennzu Byobu' by Gakken





## 7-2 Various kinds of War Flags with Crests on the Nagashino Battle

### Tokugawa Ieyasu

- 1 Rising Sun on golden fan
- 2 '五(5)' on white square flag
- 3 Golden Crest on white long flag



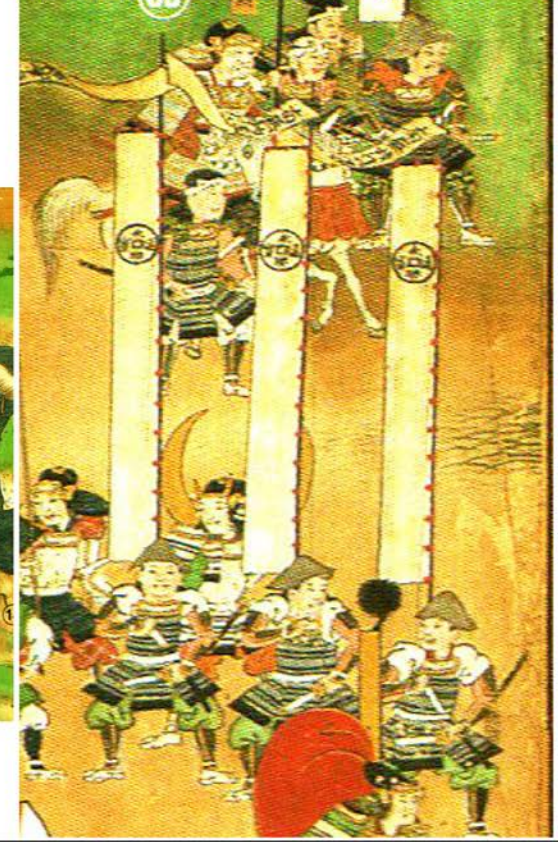
### Takeda Katsuyori

- 1 '大'(big) on white square flag
- 2 All white long flag
- 3 Black & white long flag
- 4 Rising Sun on white square
- 5 Three black circles on white flag



### Oda Nobunaga

- 1 Coin Crest on white long flag with the language of Buddha on small white flag on the top





# 8 Edo period 1603 ~ 1867

8-1 Tokugawa Ieyasu suppressed the whole country and opened Tokugawa Bakufu(Tokugawa government) in 1603. He controlled Emperor, nobles, the shrines and the Buddhist temples.

8-2 War flags begun to be used as a mark in a battlefield. But after whole country had been suppressed and there was no war, war flag finished its role. War flag changed into a ceremonious, celebrating flag and an offering flag to the shrines and the Buddhist temples.

8-3 But, many beautiful War flags were made during 1450~1650. Flags below and on next page are the flags representing this period.

Naito Masanari

Naoe Kanetsugu?

Akita Sanesue

Tugaru Tamenobu

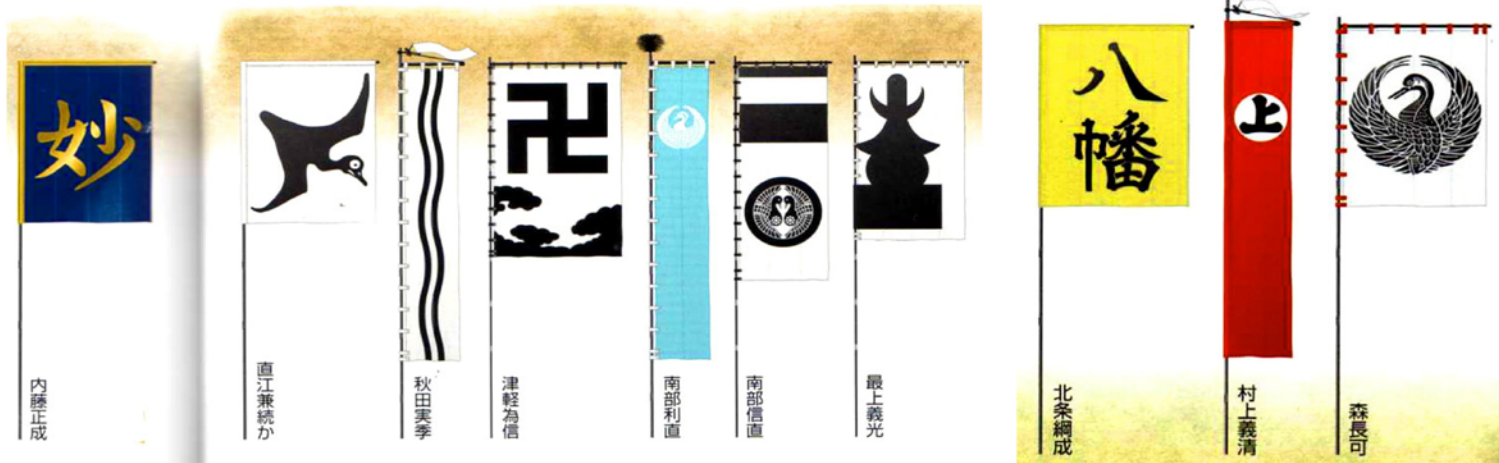
Nanbu toshinao

Mogami Yoshimitu

Hojyo Tunanari

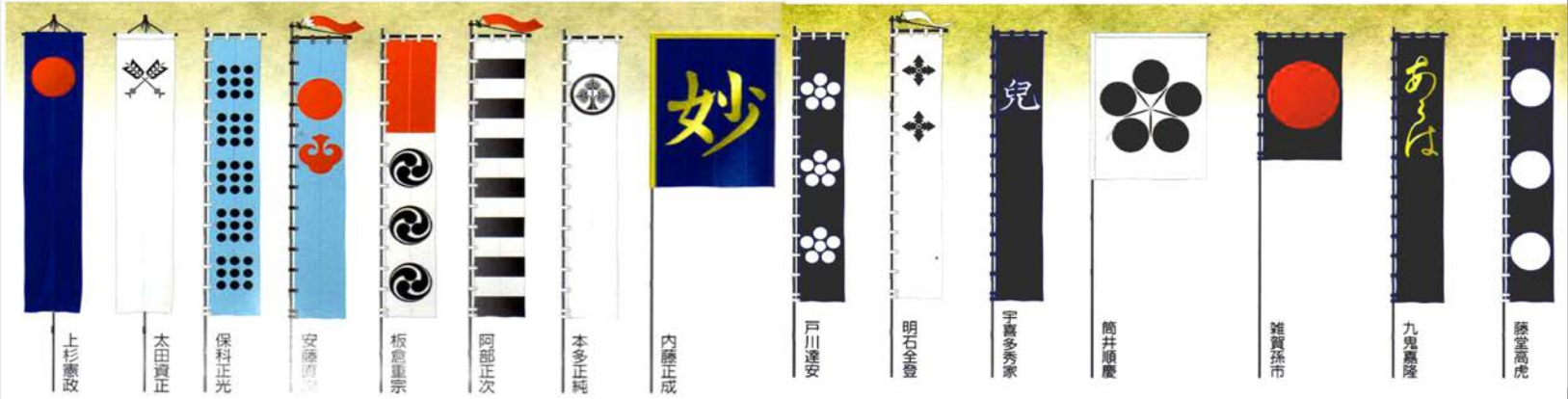
Murakami Yoshikivo

Mori Nagavoshi



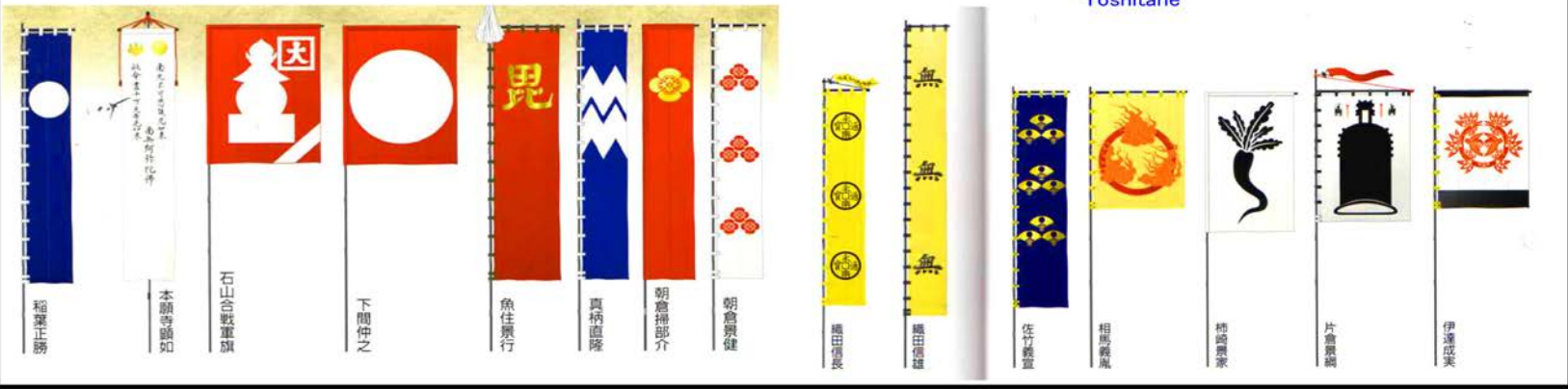


Uesugi Norimasa Ohta Sukemasu Hoshina Masamitsu Ando Naotugu Itakura Abe Sigemune masatugu Honda Masazumi Naito Masashige Togawa Tatuyasu Akashi Teruzum Ukita Hideie Tsutui Yasutaka Saika Magoichi Kuki yoshitaka Toudo Takatora P10/11



source: 'Sengoku Bussho Gunyufu' by Gakuken, 2008.11

Inaba Masakatsu Honganji Kenryo Ishiyama War flag Shimonoseki Nakayuki Uozumi Kageyuki Magara Naotaka Asakura Kamon Asakura Kagetake Oda Nobunaga Oda Nobukatsu Satake Yoshinobu Anezaki Kageie Katakura Kageituna Date Shigezane Soma Yoshitane





## 9 At the last

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9-1 When Samurai risked their lives and deaths in the battlefields, even a bold Samurai badly needed something supporting his heart. In the war time, Samurai must feel that the Crest on war flag of his leader is an object to rely on and believe in. The war flag of Japan was regarded as sacred ones in the old days.

9-2 In any time and in any country, war flags and flags were an object which everyone prayed for persons they loved. I think that the flag will continue to be an object praying for love and peace, even if the time changes.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

End