Samurai Ranks in the Kaga Domain

In general, samurai were a high-status group in Edo-period society (1603–1867). Depending on their rank, however, stark differences existed in the lifestyles permitted them. More than any other factor, rank determined a samurai’s stipend, the area of his residence, style of house, clothing, work, and rules of etiquette.

Early in the Edo period, there was disorder in the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa, centered on Kanazawa) owing to power struggles between upper members of the ruling family, but under the fifth lord (daimyo) of the domain, Maeda Tsunanori (1643–1724), samurai ranking was clearly set out. Excluding the daimyo, six ranks were established within the samurai class.

Families that were originally in positions of great power maintained their pre-eminence. As there were eight families in this category, they came to be called the “eight households” (*hakka*). Those of *hakka* rank were relatives of the daimyo or belonged to families that had played an important role in the early days of the Kaga domain. They served as senior advisers to the daimyo (*toshiyori*) charged with consulting together to manage the political affairs of the domain. They were given the most extensive estates and the largest stipends. The greatest of these households was the Honda family, followed by Nagamachi’s Cho family. All eight families had stipends of over 10,000 *koku*. A *koku* is a unit for measuring rice and was used to express the value of a samurai’s holdings; one *koku* is roughly equivalent to 180 liters of rice and was held to correspond to the amount of rice a grown person consumes in a year. In other domains, estates that produced such wealth were often concentrated in the hands of the daimyo himself. From these valuations, one can gauge the prosperity of the Kaga domain.

Below the *hakka* were those of *hitomochi-gumi* rank. Their stipends ranged from 1,000 to 14,000 *koku*. There were 60–100 families of this rank. The wealthier of them were senior officials (*karo*), while the less wealthy were junior officials called *wakadoshiyori*. Both undertook a greater share of practical administrative duties than did the *hakka* above them.

Thus, these high-ranking samurai occupied the upper echelons of society in the Kaga domain. However, the bulk of the administrative work was done by middle-ranking samurai (*heishi*). There were about 1,400 *heishi* in the Kaga domain—more than any other rank. They often held administrative and judicial offices, such as court magistrates; they also made up the cavalry in military operations.

Below the *heishi* in rank were the *yoriki*, samurai who received stipends of 60–350 *koku.* Below the *yoriki* were the *okachi*. Although members of these ranks were technically samurai, they had little or no opportunity to interact with the daimyo directly. *Yoriki* and *okachi* were typically employed as workers in magistrates’ offices.

The very lowest rank of samurai in the Kaga domain was that of *ashigaru* or foot soldier. During the long peace of the Edo period, *ashigaru* worked as gate guards or couriers (*hikyaku*). In other domains, *ashigaru* may not even have been viewed as samurai, and most lived in cramped tenement houses. However, in the comparatively prosperous Kaga domain, *ashigaru* were offered unusual incentives and amenities, which included detached family residences with their own gardens.