

Ashigaru (Foot Soldiers)

Ashigaru (literally “light feet”) were foot soldiers employed by the samurai class in feudal Japan. While in some domains *ashigaru* were not considered a part of the samurai class, the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa Prefecture centered on Kanazawa) recognized them as such—albeit the lowest rank of samurai. The Kaga domain is thought to have been attractive to *ashigaru*: there was economic opportunity, and unlike other domains, the Kaga domain allotted *ashigaru* families their own detached houses with individual gardens. That said, *ashigaru* in Kaga were still of low rank, and their lives could be difficult. In feudal Japan, one’s position in society determined salary, housing, employment, and permitted clothing and weapons. As the lowest of the samurai, *ashigaru* were forced to serve under the authority of those of higher rank, and they often struggled with poverty.

History

Ashigaru as a term appears to have existed since the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and became widely used during the Sengoku (“Warring States”) and the Momoyama periods (approximately 1467–1600).

Before the existence of formal, standing armies, landowners in Japan often armed the people who worked their land and mobilized them for battle. These landowners were the original samurai, and their farmers became the foot soldiers that made up the backbone of their armies. Thus, armed farmers are believed to have been the original *ashigaru*. In the Warring States period, however, these peasant forces proved insufficient in the face of constant warfare, and landowners sometimes resorted to hiring wandering foot soldiers. In this way, *ashigaru* numbers grew.

Early *ashigaru* formed groups of archers or spearmen, and had a reputation at the time for being untrained and unruly. They were usually mobilized for guerilla warfare. Later, when firearms were introduced to Japan in the mid-sixteenth century, warring lords made them into battalions of musketeers. This changed the reputation of *ashigaru* drastically. They became the backbone of armies, complementing the traditional mounted warriors of the samurai class. Many farmers at this time became *ashigaru* to elevate their social status.

However, with the advent of peace in the Edo period (1603–1867), the samurai class was restructured, and *ashigaru* numbers were greatly reduced. Those who remained played a less active role than they once had. Many *ashigaru* had to shoulder the double burden of remaining battle-ready while working daily as administrative assistants to samurai of higher rank. Nevertheless, they still enjoyed educational opportunities and received specialized training.

Life

Life for *ashigaru* could be difficult. They were often at the beck and call of their superiors, and their stipends were low. A typical *ashigaru* in the Kaga domain had to spend over half his yearly stipend on purchasing enough rice (the staple food of the time) to survive. So, to supplement their incomes, many *ashigaru* families took up piecework jobs which they could do in their homes when not engaged in official duties.

Clothing

Ashigaru were required to wear *hakama* for their official duties. This was a pleated pant-skirt that—in their case—extended below the knee but not to the tops of the feet. *Hakama* of greater length were only permitted to those of *okachi* rank (the rank above *ashigaru*) or higher. As their daily lives often involved work that required them to move quickly and to use their entire bodies, it was not uncommon to see *ashigaru* with their *hakama* rolled high, revealing their thighs. Even in mid-winter *ashigaru* were often to be seen with their legs exposed.