

Searching for the Missing Women in War-Prone Society of Medieval Japan

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Sophia University, Yotsuya Campus

Social scientists assert that throughout known human history, wars have been fought almost always and primarily by males, despite a few celebrated exceptions. This universal understanding fits the Japanese case well; it was mostly men who staffed the ranks of fighters, while records and tales feature a few exceptionally brave women. The condition of “near-total exclusion of women from combat forces” parallels the masculine act of describing, narrating, embellishing, and even defining the aesthetics of violence in tales and records. In reality and in texts, war conditions formulate a relatively clear contour of gendered roles, which necessarily prize martial prowess, often at the expense of other notions and activities.



It is understandable that historians, students, and popular writers look eagerly for missing female soldiers. Needless to say, becoming armed combatants was not the only way women participated in war culture. We focus on two non-combatant women, whose personal names are unknown. One was the wife of Yamanouchi Tsuneyuki (mid 14th c.) and the other was the wife of Kira Ujitomo (1535-1603). They left no written materials, but the writings of their male relatives suggest that these women may have shared a few things in common. First, they were both warriors' wives. Their husbands' profession, by definition, mandated participation in military conflicts. Second, despite the two centuries that separated the women, the reality of violence affected both of their lives acutely, though each was mediated by the particular scale and nature of the ongoing battle. Both were expected to shoulder enormous responsibility in managing the household. Their stories, along with the stories of male combatants, help us to explore the formulation and application of gendered roles in wars and war-prone conditions.

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Lecture in English/ No prior registration necessary