Reading 1: Comparing Medieval Europe & The Middle East
Eric Chaney and Lisa Blaydes, "The Feudal Revolution and Europe's Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World before 1500 CE," *American Political Science Review,* 2013

Once endorsed by the caliphs, the mamluk institution soon spread throughout the settled Middle East…The combination of cultural dissociation [disconnection] and personal dependence was a very forceful one…The foreign slaves existed in the Muslim polity [state] only through the ruler. It was this extinction of the soldier's autonomy which made the mamluk such a superb instrument of his master's will when it was coupled with personal obedience; by the same token, of course, it made the loss of personal obedience the more disastrous. And it was a feature which sharply differentiated a servile [slave] army from a feudal one.

Muslim rulers, unlike their European counterparts, had the administrative and financial capacity to import slaves from outside of their realms to provide military services. In Europe, the primitive state of European economies left land grants [fiefs] as the only option for cash-strapped monarchs, a process which eventually created a powerful, landed, and independent military class. Mounted warriors, or knights, were often compensated for their service to the king through land grants. European barons [nobles] operating in the feudal system entered battle with their own, privately funded armies. Such individuals often enjoyed opportunities to increase their land holdings or other forms of advancement as a result of their fighting. Together, the methods of military recruitment that emerged in medieval Europe came to be known as the feudal system. The barons were not foreigners or slaves, but free members of their own state…

While European rulers were negotiating with local gentry to raise armies for matters of defense, Islamic rulers bypassed local elites by creating highly skilled armies of foreigners who had no ties to the existing gentry or landowning and swore allegiance directly to the sultan. While military slaves enjoyed the ability to serve as tax collectors as part of the iqta' system, this system did not invest the military class with land in a way comparable to the European fief. Unlike the barons who were central to local society in Europe, mamluks were essentially tax collectors, detached from land ownership. Financial compensation and the promise of power rather than land ownership assured their service and maintained their loyalty. Slave soldiers became part of the institutions of central, not local, government, and their social position was a result of their proximity to the seats of power [the sultan or caliph]. They were kept purposely in isolation from the locals and were unable to transform themselves into a landowning elite in part because of the impossibility of transmitting mamluk status to one's children.

Meanwhile, the local elites of Muslim society were not like the nobility of European society, who often held public office or influenced local governance. Islamic government was more centralized, and dependence on mamluk armies and officials for tax collection and military service limited the power of local elites, as they (typically) did not have military or political power. In contrast, European kings—while the technical heads of government in their respective territories—had ceded considerable strength to local strongmen who enjoyed both public and private power, including control over public goods [defense, justice, buildings, etc] and land and taxes. This emergence of a landed nobility with an independent power base led to competition

and at times open conflict between members of the clergy, the aristocracy, and the rulers, allowing various groups to leverage one group against another in order to accomplish their objectives, especially with the rise of cities and the emergence of merchant elites [burghers] in the Late Middle Ages.

The cities of Europe that emerged in the High Middle Ages became centers of wealth and learning that were not tied to landowning or the Church, allowing new rivals to traditional holders of power to emerge.There became a clear contrast between urban elites [merchants] and rural elites [nobles/knights]. As the landed military [the lords] gained power at the expense of rulers [kings], merchant elites seem to have used the conflicting interests of the nobility, the clergy, and the ruler to obtain greater independence and create urban institutions such as guilds and systems of taxation and justice, often by obtaining town charters establishing a city. The ability of merchants to ally, for example, with the ruler (or the local aristocracy) against the bishop or lord of their town proved key to the emergence of autonomous urban institutions that could serve their interests. Feudalism and decentralization coincided with a rise of a powerful landed aristocracy that proved instrumental in constraining the sovereign through the development of medieval parliaments.Kings began to convene assemblies of their vassals to discuss and negotiate military activities and taxes; and over time, cities and towns gained the right to send representatives to what became parliaments.

The instruments of power for Muslim rulers—different from what was the rule in Western Europe—nearly never stemmed from the elites of their society…Those with high standing, scholars and traders, could make their voice heard by literature and religion, but they were largely a "non-political" elite that was influential but did not dominate political power. In the Middle East, no separation of powers occurred like what emerged in Western Europe. Instead, rulers used slave armies (mamluks) to prevent the emergence of a landed aristocracy and a European-style separation of powers. As a consequence, the rulers of the Middle East continued to ally with religious leaders. Together, these two groups worked to block institutional innovations that would have been detrimental to their interests.

By building up a retinue of freed slaves, mostly of Turkish origin, Muslim rulers hoped to make themselves independent of other wielders of power. European rulers would have liked to have avoided the emergence of a landed aristocracy as well, but the military and financial challenges in Europe forced European rulers to rely on and empower local lords. Medieval European kings, operating from a position of financial weakness and limited state capacity, had no choice but to offer fiefs as payment to elites who provided rulers with military support. Feudalism led this emergent warrior class to be rooted in the land in a way that was distinct from the nature of military recruitment and remuneration [compensation] in the Islamic world. The landed nobility in Europe were able to eventually extract both concessions and protections from the state, leading to the rise of medieval parliaments and the types of institutions that are believed to lead to long term growth.

Reading 2: "Feudal" Japan?

Passage 1: Jeremy Adelman, *Worlds Together Worlds Apart*

"Feeling the pull of China's economic and political gravity, cultures around China consolidated their own internal political authority and redefined their own identities in order to keep China from swallowing them up. At the same time, they increased their commercial transactions with China. In Japan, for instance, leaders distanced themselves from Chinese influences, but they also developed a strong sense of their islands' distinctive identity. Even so, the long-standing dominance of Chinese ways remained apparent at virtually every level of Japanese society and was most pronounced at the imperial court in the capital city of Heian (present-day Kyoto), which was modeled after the Chinese capital city of Chang'an. Outside Kyoto, however, a less China-centered way of life existed and began to impose itself on the center. Here, local notables, mainly military leaders and large landowners, began to challenge the imperial court for dominance. This challenge was accompanied by the arrival of an important new social group in Japanese society—samurai warriors. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, Japan had multiple sources of political and cultural power: an imperial family with prestige but little authority; an endangered and declining aristocracy; powerful landowning notables based in the provinces; and a rising and increasingly ambitious class of samurai."

Passage 2: Ann Kordas, Ryan J. Lynch, Brooke Nelson, and Julie Tatlock; *World History Volume I,* 2023

"The prevailing view today is that the samurai emerged as the result of a weakened imperial system. The [Japanese] imperial court had modeled its administration on institutions imported from Tang China, which included a governing ideology based on Confucianism and a military establishment that depended on a peasant-conscript army. This system proved ineffective in Japan, however, resulting in an inept [ineffective] central government that failed amid warfare and regional rebellion beginning in the early tenth century. The subsequent breakdown in public order prompted people in the countryside to take matters into their own hands. Provincial families armed themselves to defend and advance their private interests, allowing them to reclaim land and gain influence at the Court by acting as regional warlords who could impose stability and security over rebellion. By 1100, therefore, samurai organized in regional bands were emerging as a major force in Japan's military and political arenas."

Reading 3: The Case against a "One Size Fits All Model"

Karl Friday, "Once and Future Warriors: The Samurai in Japanese History," Association for Asian Studies, 2005

Until a generation ago, scholars pondering the samurai were all-too-readily seduced by perceptions of an essential similarity between conditions in medieval Japan and those of northwestern Europe… Medieval Japan and medieval Europe represented fundamentally different societies, knights and samurai were born under fundamentally different circumstances, and samurai political power evolved along a fundamentally different path into significantly different shapes and forms from those of European lordship.