

THE KONDEI SYSTEM: AN OFFICIAL ORDER OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE

Introduction

In the ancient Japan, the central government's military forces were generally made up of conscripted peasants, drilled into service as part of their labor obligation to the state. By the eighth century, however, rising disorder in the countryside brought the effectiveness of traditional, conscripted military units into question. The Emperor Kammu (737-806; r. 782-806), who was responsible for moving the capital of Japan from Nara to Nagaoka-kyō in 784, and then to Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto) a decade later, decreed a series of military reforms, notably the *kondei* system of 792. *Kondei* has been translated by some scholars as "stalwart youth" and by others as "able-bodied young men."

Document Excerpt with Questions

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On the matter relating to the recruitment of the *kondei* (physically able).

Thirty people from the province of Yamato.

Thirty people from the province of Kawachi.

Twenty people from the province if Izumi¹. ...

Previously [on the seventh day of this month], the Minister of the Right [Fujiwara Tsugunawa] declared that in obedience to the imperial command [all military divisions consisting of] conscript soldiers stationed in the provinces should be abolished with the exception of those in the important border areas. The munitions depots, outposts, and governmental offices which were previously defended by them should be defended by the *kondei* to be sent to those positions. We now order that you select those physically able from among the sons of the district chiefs (*kōri no tsukasa*), and place them to serve on these posts on a rotating basis.

Eleventh year of Enryaku (792), sixth month, 14th day.

¹ Levies from 48 other provinces omitted from the translated version.

Questions:

1. How does this order change the system for recruiting soldiers for the government's military forces?
2. How might this system have served to improve discipline, professionalism, and preparedness in Japan's military?
3. The *kondei* system is sometimes seen as an important step in the rise of the warrior elite (the samurai) in Japan. Why do you think this is the case?
4. Had you been a Japanese peasant at the time, how do you think you would have felt about this order from the imperial capital?