

Articles by NDL staff

# Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 2

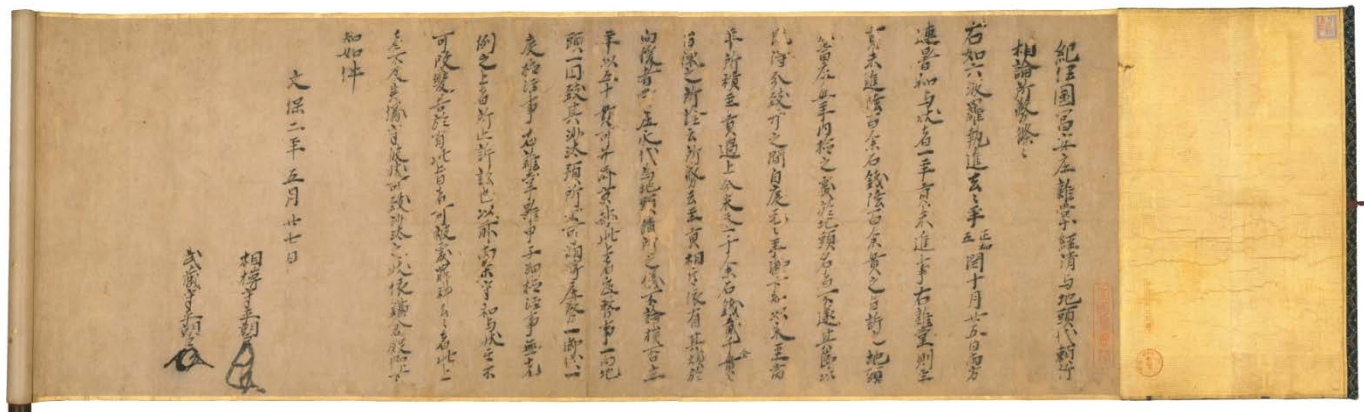
## Shoguns of the Kamakura Shogunate "reigned but did not rule"?

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This article is a translation of the article in Japanese of the same title in *NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 674 (June 2017)*.

The new series entitled Browsing Library Materials features materials from the NDL's collections that require a bit of explanation to be fully appreciated. Here is an old document from medieval Japan.

- [Browsing library materials—A look at documents from medieval Japan, Part 1: A document from an arrogant sender? \(No. 212, June 2017\)](#)



*Kantogechijo* dated in May 27, 1318  
 From *Kamakuradonogejijo*, NDL Call No: WA25-43  
 \*Available in the [National Diet Library Digital Collections](#).

The document shown above was issued by the Kamakura Shogunate on May 27, 1318. This type of document is

known as a *kantogechijo*, and the word kanto here refers to the Kamakura Shogunate.



An enlargement of the beginning part of the document

This is a lengthy document that is difficult to understand at first glance. Actually, the first two lines (marked (1)) form a heading, called *kotogaki* in Japanese, that summarizes the content. The structure of the *kotogaki* is "A 与 B 相論 C," wherein "与" means "and" (&), and "相論" means "lawsuit." So, the heading says this is in reference to a judgment by the Kamakura Shogunate concerning a lawsuit about C between A and B. In short,

this document delivers a judgment. In medieval Japan, such judgments were called *saikyo*, and this type of document is also called a *kantosaikyojo*. In this article, we will describe the format and style of the document without reference to the judgment itself, which is complicated and difficult to understand. The format, which is called *gechijo*, was commonly used by the Kamakura Shogunate and reflects its political structure.



An enlargement of the latter part of the document

At the end of this document there are two kao (marked (3)) (See Column 1 of [Part 1](#)): one by the Regent of the Shogunate, Hojo Takatoki, and the other by the Assistant Regent, Kanesawa Sadaaki. At the end of the document (marked (2)) there is a *kakitome* (concluding comment) indicating that "the aforementioned judgment is per the order of the Lord of Kamakura." In this case, "the Lord of Kamakura" refers not to the Regent but to the *Sei-i Taishogun* (Shogun), the symbolic commander in chief of the Kamakura Shogunate. Although written as if the Shogun himself had given the order, it is more likely that the Shogun never heard about this lawsuit at all. The two kao of the Regent and Assistant Regent strongly imply that they alone were responsible for the final disposition of this case.

#### Column: Hojo Takatoki, the Regent of the Shogun, and Kanesawa Sadaaki, his assistant

Hojo Takatoki was 16 years old and Kanesawa Sadaaki was 41 years old when this document was issued.

Takatoki had been named Regent of the Shogunate, the effective leader of the Kamakura Shogunate, at the age of 14, and remained head of the Kamakura Hojo clan until its overthrow in 1333, when he was 30. Sadaaki was a member of the Kanesawa branch of the Hojo clan, and is credited with having greatly developed a private library, known as the Kanesawa Bunko, that his grandfather created.

The Shogun at the time this document was issued was Imperial Prince Morikuni. He was the ninth and final Kamakura Shogun, a figurehead position that had been customarily given to members of the Imperial Family since the middle of the Kamakura period.

In 1333, surrounded by troops under the command of Nitta Yoshisada, Takatoki, Sadaaki, and the rest of the Hojo clan committed suicide as the Kamakura Shogunate was overthrown. All that is known of Prince Morikuni's fate is that he passed away a few months later.

Minamoto no Yoritomo established the Kamakura Shogunate and was named the first Shogun. He was a powerful leader who performed many administrative



duties himself, including issuing documents like *kudashibumi* with his handwritten *kao*. Over time, however, the position of Shogun in the Kamakura Shogunate was reduced to that of a mere figurehead, as the Hojo clan seized political power and named its members to influential positions. Thus, Hojo clan members came to dominate by maintaining a firm grip on the Regent of the Shogunate and other important

positions, resulting in a system in which the Shogun "reigned but did not rule." The format and style of *gechijo* issued by the Regent and Assistant Regent in the Shogun's name thus came to match the reality of the political system under the Kamakura Shogunate. (See the figure below.)

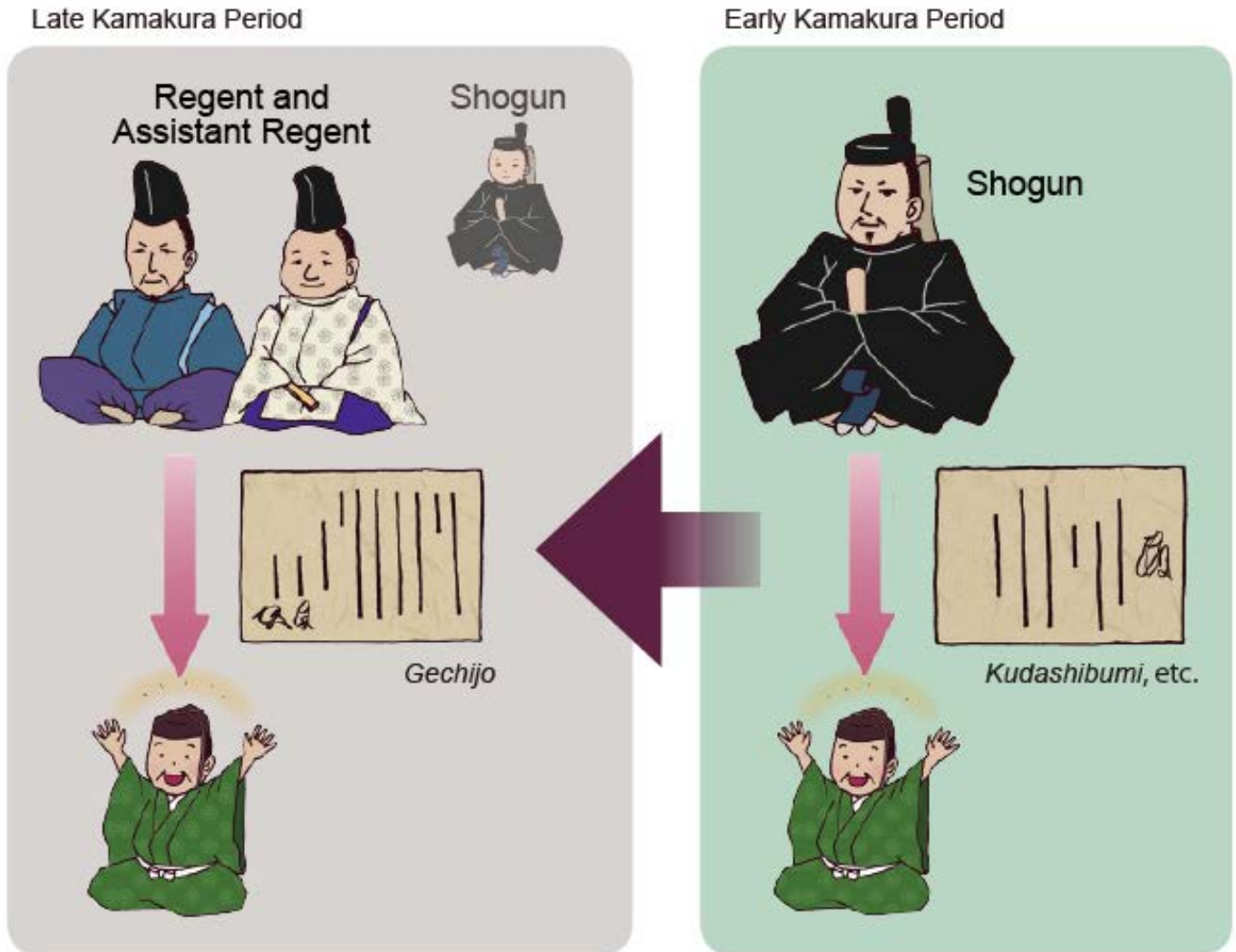


Figure: Change from official documents issued by the Shogun himself to documents issued by the Regent and Assistant Regent.

After the overthrow of the Kamakura Shogunate, the Muromachi Shogunate was eventually established in the aftermath of a large-scale civil war. Given the demand for strong leadership on the part of the Shogun, the system was reverted to its earlier form, in which documents were issued directly by the Shogun bearing his *kao*, as was done in the age of Minamoto no Yoritomo.

Gohan no migyosho by Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in the [previous article](#) is an example of this.

(Illustrations by Satsuki Shobo,  
translated by Kanako Ogawa)