

## RESEARCH

# EVERYDAY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN

Michigan holds a summer workshop on the sources

By Terre Fisher

In the Asia Library seminar room, Professor Shōji Sasamoto stood next to the projection of a hand-inscribed text mounted on a hanging scroll. He gestured toward one of the participants, who had raised her hand.

“But why would the personal seal be placed there?” she asked. “In the previous document, it was at the end.”

“The last document we looked at was an order from the warlord to provide tax exemptions, but it was sent through his right-hand man,” Professor Sasamoto, the session leader, answered. “So, the seal validates that the command came from Takeda Katsuyori himself. But in this document, we’re not seeing an attempt to assert the [warlord] family’s power. Instead they’re trying to stop the unlawful distribution of goods.”

He explained that the placement of the seal was critical to understanding the document. Sasamoto translated: “The document says, [At] Uminokuchi [Village]. If a [document] does not have this seal, do not dispatch [the Takeda’s] servicemen and carrier horses.”

“So the seal is right next to the ‘this seal’ phrase, for clarity, rather than trying to emphasize the overlord’s authority,” he said.

This was a typical conversation at the University of Michigan’s Medieval *Komonjo* Workshop, which ran from July 9 to August 3. Participants included graduate students, faculty, librarians, and independent scholars who got the rare chance to compare print versions of medieval Japanese documents (*komonjo* 古文書) with images of the real thing. They pored over photographs of the originals, diligently examining the calligraphy, positioning of lines, paper quality—and the placement of seals.

Intensive workshops like this are typically offered once a year at only one location worldwide. This year’s workshop was a first for U-M.

History graduate student Paula R. Curtis and Professor Hitomi Tonomura conceived a plan to host the month-long program last summer. They set the topic—“Commoners and Authority in Medieval Japan”—and recruited scholars from Japan and North America to lead the daily exercises. Eleven faculty and graduate students enrolled, with eight relocating to Ann Arbor

for the course of the two-session workshop—one focused on the early medieval period (1185-1333) and one focused on the late medieval period (1336-1603). The organizers obtained funding to keep participation in the program free and provide housing support for out-of-town guests.

“Training for graduate students and scholars studying medieval Japan is hard to come by,” said Curtis. “The documents are idiosyncratic, and it’s not enough to teach yourself from a book. To master the primary sources, you either go to Japan for an extended period and receive one-on-one tutoring from a professor or enter a Japanese seminar. There are seldom opportunities like this in North America or Europe.”

Two eminent scholars, Shin’ichirō Takahashi (Historiographical Institute of the University of Tokyo) and Shōji Sasamoto (Nagano Prefectural Museum of History), led the work on the documents, which are written predominantly in Chinese characters. Eric C. Rath (University of Kansas) visited for two weeks to help participants explore sources related to food culture and other expressions of everyday life.

Each morning and afternoon, workshop members gathered in the Asia Library to review several documents, preparing medieval transcriptions and reading them aloud. The session leader corrected their work and discussed the nuances of words whose readings changed over time or were context-specific.

Participants then volunteered their modern Japanese translations and interpretations, with the instructors offering historical insights into the terms, historical practices, and documentary conventions in the medieval period. Finally, the group worked together to produce English translations that could do justice to the originals, grappling with the frequent ambiguities in the historical materials.

“Trying to decipher and make sense of these documents is more complicated than solving a complex puzzle,” said Tonomura. “Scholars spend decades learning and refining these skills but, really, a lifelong effort still isn’t enough. Translating them is surely not for the faint hearted!”

Why Japan, why now? Despite the liveliness of the historical record, certain topics—like the lives of common folk in Japan’s medieval era—



From left to right: Professor Shōji Sasamoto, Carolyn Wargula, Breann Goosmann, Tom Newhall, and Tetiana Topolian discuss methods of folding medieval documents. (photo: Paula R. Curtis)

continue to be understudied outside Japan. As the practice of history becomes increasingly global and comparative, medieval Japanese history, a field where few sources have been translated into English, is frequently left out of important conversations.

Additionally, the dearth of premodern historians outside Japan means that modern Japanese history is often taught with little understanding of its deeply layered foundation—more than a millennium of documented history. This leaves us with few tools to puncture stereotypes or challenge received accounts.

“There are relatively few people who study medieval Japan, and our opportunities to learn and grow together, especially across academic institutions, are limited,” said Curtis. “An event like this allows faculty, graduate students, and independent scholars from distant places to come together and develop these skills while building a greater sense of community.”

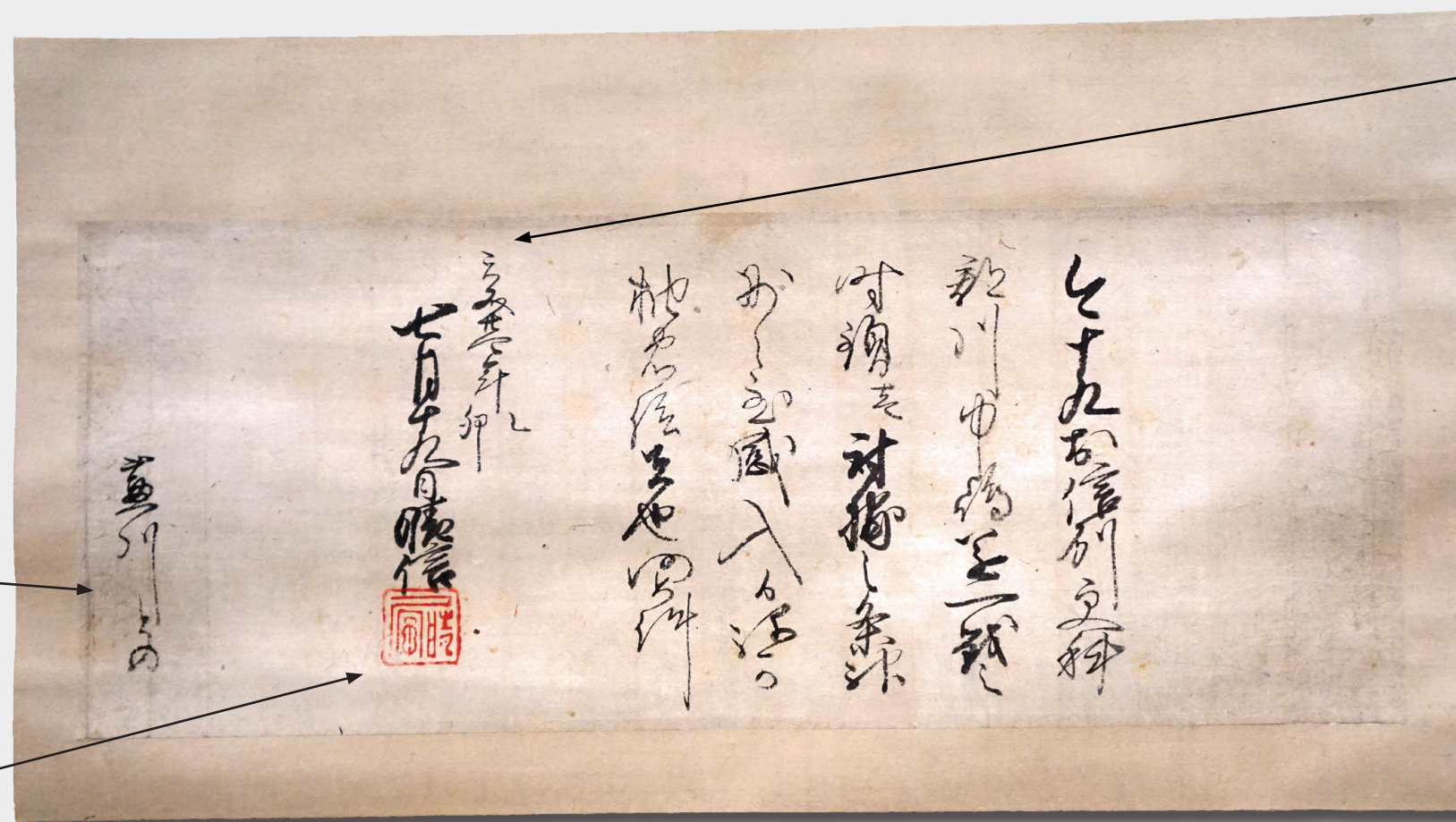
## The Art of Translation

A warrior received this letter in 1555 from Takeda Harunobu as a reward for his service in one of the many battles of Kawanakajima, fought on the borders of Kai Province and Shinano Province (modern day Nagano) between 1553 to 1564.

The document expresses Harunobu’s praise and appreciation to one Ashikawa for having served loyally and for taking an enemy head. Documents with the same wording were addressed to at least eleven other men. To them, receiving a document with Shingen’s red seal was meaningful. But it also proved one’s worthiness, which could translate into a reward.

The high or low placement of the recipient’s name indicates their relative status to the sender. In this case, the name is in the lower half of the page, appropriate for a subordinate receiving a letter from the *daimyo* (warlord).

The red seal of Takeda Harunobu appears below his written name, authenticating Harunobu’s words and his authority, even if his secretary actually wrote all of them. Medieval warrior seals were typically carved stone or cast in metal, so they deteriorate slowly over time, unlike those used by early modern artists after 1600.



This document is dated “Tenbun 24, 7th month, 19th day.” Checking whether or not a document has an era name—in this case, Tenbun 24 (1555)—can be one clue to its veracity. In periods of political schism, different political factions tried to assert their own calendrical systems and used individualized era names.

This document has been mounted on a hanging scroll for exhibition, using a light glue to seal it to a wider sheet of paper. Folding patterns can illuminate the statuses and relationship between sender and recipient. This information is sometimes lost with this kind of preservation for display.



Photos courtesy Professor Shōji Sasamoto.